

A large, realistic hand is shown reaching upwards from the bottom of the frame towards the top. The hand is positioned as if it is about to grasp something. The background is a sky filled with soft, white and grey clouds. The overall composition is vertical and evokes a sense of aspiration or reaching for something higher.

Down to Heaven

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Foreword

Listen, ugly adults.

No one told us about whether human lives were beautiful or ugly, and about whether fighting was right or wrong.

Nobody could do so, because no one knew that.

Only those who gave up on trying to know that became adults.

They knew beauty only through the word “beautiful”.

They knew the meaning of fighting only through the word “fighting”.

They were afraid of living and so reluctant that they did not want to know anything.

Don't you care whether it is beautiful or right, or whether it is ugly or wrong?

Only those who try to fight are willing to learn what the beauty is.

That's all.

The children who have failed to become adults because of the reason are still glaring at you.

Down to Heaven

He was unwilling to lie down in bed, and was sleeping on the sofa instead. Lying there while looking at a wall almost all the time, in his loneliness he was suffering from the same inexplicable anguish. At the same time, in solitude he was contemplating his still insoluble thoughts: 'What is this? Is this really the matter called death?' Then, his inner voice replied: 'Yes, that is what it is.' He asked: 'What is this agony for?' Again, the voice answered. 'It is for nothing. That is the way it is.' Beyond that, there was nothing more.

This excerpt is from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* originally written in Russian by Leo Tolstoy.

Prologue

The one was not a child.

At first, the two of our aircrafts confronted five enemies. In the end, it was a one-on-one dogfight. I got three of them. Sakuragi on my side got another. Then, the last of the enemies shot down Sakuragi, because I was having trouble with shooting down the third target. It was just a little too late.

Sakuragi was a newcomer, who had been assigned to our base half a year ago and he had a good stuff. If he managed to stay alive until next year, he would have become a capable pilot. That was what I speculated. But, finally, the three beautiful pink flames were blazing up, followed by a thin gray smoke streak. He was pulled straight into the clouds.

Only for the brief moment, I felt a sense of responsibility.

It was about my decision that I made for engaging in the aerial combat against the enemies, not for retreating, despite having to deal with being outnumbered five to two. It was not about having regrets. But, I had to admit that my decision had to do with his death, which could be explained as a simple reason. In the first place, I was assuming full responsibility for this flight mission, and I could say that he understood it quite well. But I judged we would get them, considering the piloting skills of mine and Sakuragi's. I still thought it was not a wrong decision. Consequently, although we lost one, we still managed to shoot down all five of the enemies at the end of the engagement. It was not a small achievement, and I would not score low on the grading.

It was, however, the result of the thoughts by those who are on the ground.

In the sky, we don't have time to regret.

At the time, my mind was reset in an instant.

I was gazing at the one who had shot down Sakuragi. I was following its trace without a break.

Far away.

But, it had not left the airspace.

It's coming to me.

The one has to be looking at me as well.

Definitely, it's coming.

To shoot down me, who had shot down three of them.

No, that doesn't matter.

No grudge.

No fear.

Rather, if I had feelings in me, then it would be respect for the opponent.

By remaining up here, both of us felt the joyful exuberance with each other.

I might feel like shaking hands with the pilot.

It was the gratitude for having come to me all the way up here.

Hey, come on.

Finally, it is the last phase.

Let's go.

Let us fight beautifully.

It is my only wish.

It is approaching me.

I am coming to you.

Both of us were increasing the angles, orienting the aircrafts obliquely, and starting to make turns.

It was the attitude with which I looked at the target above me.

I have enough fuel. I have just jettisoned the drop tank. The oil pressure and the oil temperature are normal. Control linkages and trim tabs are aligned just completely. The engine is running smoothly. The condition at its best.

I take a deep breath, and relax my shoulders to let go of the tension.

Good ... Relax.

Don't worry. No one can shoot you down.

Let me show you how beautifully and gracefully I can fly.

Since the opponent was flying a new model of the pusher configuration aircraft like mine, we were even in terms of the hardware performances. It had the tendency to yaw like a feint as if a human being was jiggling the knees. I guess the movement was to check the density of the air with its rudders. It still seemed to have a rocket under one of the wings, and it was not of an antiaircraft variety.

I can't wait till I get to check out what it has got.

I am putting the elevators in the pull-up maneuver, little by little.

The response is getting heavier gradually.

My body is pressed against the seat with the acceleration.

Gradually, my focus is concentrated around my fingertips.

It was as if my blood current were flowing to the point.

I shook the wings gently right and left, pulled the control stick even more diagonally, and cut my way inside the arc.

Almost at the same time, the enemy was coming inward as well.

My left hand grabbing the throttle lever was waiting for the timing.

We passed each other while having the wings vertically oriented.

The air shock came a bit later. *The vibration of the airframe.*

I look back.

Neither of us shot the other.

It was smart not to try a futile attempt.

I snapped while making an outside loop, and then turned over like a leaf via the snap roll maneuver.

The opponent was flying at the lower altitude. To the left side below me.

Intuitively, I banked to the left. I entered the dive phase, and glided downward.

Bank to the left even more, then to the right a bit, and left again. Elevators deflected.

I had my aircraft point upward while making use of the velocity, and then rolled over by 180 degrees.

The enemy was making a turn. I executed the Immelmann turn to make a half loop from the inverted flight. I made a zippy sharp turn, and let my aircraft face the right side.

The opponent was escaping downward.

I let it stall again, and forced the nose to face the enemy by taking advantage of the torque. In the meantime, I checked the meters.

The nose of my aircraft was facing down.

I'm falling downward.

I pushed up the throttle.

Deliberately, I was being patient about the timing to use the elevators.

I sped up explosively.

Obliquely to the front.

It is noticing me now. He is about to face me.

Too late.

It is coming within my shooting range.

Fire.

Getting away.

I saw him shooting.

No sound.

Did I get him?

I'm okay.

Full up.

By holding the breath, I endured the acceleration for three seconds.

Neutral. My aircraft was exactly facing the zenith.

While ascending, I made a roll. I looked back, to the right and left.

I cannot find it. Where is it? I cannot tell.

For the moment, I gained the altitude with full throttle.

There it is. It is climbing toward me.

What a tough guy.

I pulled the elevator control for the upward pitch, and assumed the inverted and horizontal flight.

I read the opponent's vector.

It's strange. Its movement is sluggish.

When it reached the same altitude as mine, and made a half roll, small flames leaped from the cowlings of the aircraft. I knew my last shot hit it. It was starting to emit white smoke.

I made a half-roll maneuver, and flew normally, with the canopy facing upward.

Taking a deep breath.

I got this one.

Although it was still flying, I guessed that it would not come to me anymore. *Would it lower the altitude or escape from this airspace? It can do whatever it prefers.*

I took off my goggles, and looked around.

No one is up here. Only the clouds and the sun.

I checked the fuel and recognized the direction I was facing. I had to return to the base alone.

Then, I saw a moving shadow at the edge of my sight.

The aircraft that was dragging the smoke streak was coming toward me.

“Hey, do you want more of that?” I murmured. “You shouldn’t.”

Its engine did not have enough power anymore. I could even tell just by observing it. It was likely to be impossible to gain the higher altitude.

I had my aircraft float a bit. I tried to dodge it by doing so. But it was still lunging straight at me. It was pointing the nose upward forcefully, and started shooting at me just before entering the stalling phase.

Obviously, there was no chance for the bullets to reach me.

Still, it was not shooting at the sun, or anything like that. I was sure that it was targeting me.

Even though it is a rare sight, I guess that there is such an insane warrior like this.

After taking a deep breath, I adjusted the goggles.

“It can’t be helped.” I whispered faintly.

I guess it wants to be shot down definitely. Each one may have an ideal ending of life. If that is what it wants, then it is the chivalry of my manners to respond to the request.

Turning over.

I flew invertedly for a while, and checked the status of the struggling opponent.

I will finish this in an instant.

I banked to the left and descended as if I was wiping the aerial highway.

Adjusting the velocity with the flaps. Synchronize with the opponent’s motion.

It is probably attempting to point upward by making use of the stalling. It is the only option left for it. Shall I disturb its timing and take the position below it as a countering maneuver?

I will get you as you wish.

Closing in with the knife-edge flight like aluminum foil.

As expected, it started pointing upward.

Immediately after that, I assumed the downward dive.

It shoots again. Too far.

In a moment, I took the position below the enemy.

It was still in the state of stalling, which meant that its rudders were not working yet.

While sliding with the rudders, I had my aircraft point upward.

It was coming in front of me.

I shot at its center for one second.

I could perceive the traces of my own bullets.

It's like archery.

I made a roll to the right to break away.

I started turning, and tried to check the state of the enemy aircraft.

It's over. It was already going down. The smoke was now black and it was massive enough to hide the propeller blades.

I decided to get closer to it, because I wanted to see the face. It was rare for me to feel that way. Rather, I had never experienced the feeling before. *Even though I respect those who pilot aircrafts, I have not really wanted to take a look at their faces. Never.* It had got to be the first time for me to think that way. I had to be having the premonition of something unusual pertaining to the pilot.

I was descending slowly and diagonally. It seemed to be controlling the elevators for the pull-up maneuver to try to maintain its altitude, but its engine was about to drop dead. It was probably about to stall before long.

As I get nearer, I noticed that the pilot was trying to open the canopy.

I closed the distance and flew side-by-side, along with the aircraft.

I could see his face. It was turning toward me.

He was wearing a gray beard. He was an aged male. He saw me and seemed to be smiling. I saw his white teeth. *Is he being simply insane as I have expected? Or, is he satisfied with this result?*

I was on the side toward the sun, so I did not think that he could see my face. Still, I made a salute for him. I could accept such a gesture of courtesy, as much as as I could for the phrase “world peace”. It was somewhat similar to souvenirs at tourist sites. I no longer felt that to do anything of the sort was such a drag, maybe because I had grown up.

I saw a small explosion in front of its cowlings, and several cowl flaps were blown away. The flames expanded again. Its propeller engine stopped, and was hidden in the smoke. Its canopy remained half-open. *That is your last chance to escape,* I thought. But, he was not showing any sign of doing so at all. *Is he going to keep on gliding and attempt to land by pitching the aircraft upward near the ground?* But it was dangerous and difficult to time properly. There was only one chance. To begin with, I did not think

the rear part of the fuselage could stay intact until then. The framing would melt down and lose its weight balance at any moment.

You should give up now.

I wanted to say so.

At the time, he deflected the elevators to let it pitch upward.

Is he attempting to stall?

A small sound.

His aircraft was flying a little behind me.

I looked diagonally backward at him.

What is the sound from?

He shot a rocket.

My right hand that was grabbing the control stick responded only for a moment.

The rocket passed by me, and then was flying in front of me.

Flying straight, it vanished into the cloud.

It has nothing to do with me.

I was fascinated by the rocket.

It was when I looked back to the right side behind me.

His airframe was facing me.

I pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators.

It was too late.

I was shot.

Ascend.

Full throttle.

Immediately after that, the enemy was below me. It was already losing its control and was flipped sideways.

“Damn it!” I shouted.

I will give him another shot. I looked downward, but I did not need to do so. Its tank likely caught fire, and a huge explosion blew off the cowling. *That's the end.*

He shot the rocket that was mounted on one of the wings, to direct the aircraft sideways with the reactive force. *How could I have expected him to execute such a trick?* It had got to be the most desperate of desperation. I ended up receiving the final measure attack.

Check the meters.

What part of my fuselage has been shot?

The fuel and the oil pressure are okay.

I check the engine sound. The control surfaces, too.

Nothing is wrong.

Good.

Check both sides. Did it hit the wing edge?

I heard such an unpleasant sound.

I looked back to the right side, and noticed that the canopy had a crack.

Indeed, it's not my day.

Damn it!

It was not what a child would do.

Is it so-called persistence of an adult?

Shucks.

Ah, well, why did he do that?

Then, I took a deep breath.

I should truncate it.

I don't want to deal with such a disturbing thought.

I just have to have one of those days like this.

I cannot be perfect all the time.

Right, the fact that Sakuragi was shot down is far more significant.

It can't be helped.

I flew for a while and made sure that the fuselage of my aircraft was suffering from no further malfunctioning. I decided to go back to the base in a leisurely way.

Above the cloud, I flew toward the sun.

About 30 minutes had passed and then I sank below the clouds.

It was drizzling near the ground.

The cracked canopy was blowing a whistle poorly.

I flew for another 20 minutes.

I entered the area where I could use the radio, and contacted the airbase. I got permission for landing, passed by above the runway once, and lowered the altitude while making a turn above a river.

They are likely to have realized that only one of us has come back.

Probably, no one will mention the fact.

They would just apply the treatment to rethink that the missing pilot had not even existed from the beginning.

Or, it was as if they would tear a page out of a notebook.

Engine sounds.

The sound of zipping wind.

The creaking of the fuselage.

My breath.

As the ground was getting closer to me, the scenery around me appeared to be scrolling faster.

It's all gray.

Anywhere on the ground is gray.

And it gets tacky and wet.

Although I was worrying about the landing gears, they managed to be deployed properly. I was ready for the landing. With the wind blowing from the side, I

approached the runway diagonally, by using the rudders.

I felt sleepy every time I was just about to land. *Why? Does it mean that it is the place for me to sleep? Even birds go back to their nests to sleep.*

With squeaking sounds, the tires were rubbed against the runway.

The rumbling, rolling sounds. The feeling of the disgusting gravity.

All things such as buildings, bicycles, trees, and grasses are dropped here on the ground.

Most of them remain dropped, from birth until death.

The aircraft was wrapped with sticky rain, and it decelerated even further.

I used the brake a bit and proceeded to the taxiway leading to the hangar. I made a salute toward a man who was on a light 4x4 vehicle passing by. I opened the canopy a bit. The moist air hit my face. The rain was not as ridiculous as I expected.

In front of a hangar, Sasakura was waiting for me with an open umbrella in his hand. He was wearing the dirty jumpsuit as usual. He would keep wearing it unless an angel would advise him to wash it.

I turned off the ignition. The repeated reverberation of the propellers remained.

Put on the brake. My aircraft stopped.

Oh, I'm sleepy.

Sigh.

I'm drunk. Every time I fly, I end up getting drunk.

Sasakura trotted toward me, and stepped on the main wing from the front side.

I was waiting for him, with my back on the seat.

The canopy was opened.

“Are you okay?” Sasakura asked me.

“About what?” I took off the goggles and responded while keeping my eyes shut.

The sight was getting dark. I opened my eyes a bit, and saw Sasakura's face right in front of me. He was looking inside the canopy. *I know, he is worrying about the part that had been shot.*

“Sorry. The windshield is expensive, right?” I said.

“What are you talking about?” Sasakura replied with the angry tone of his voice.
“Let me see it.”

“What do I let you see?”

An automobile was approaching very fast. It belonged to the rescue squad.

Sasakura touched my neck.

I felt a little cold.

I knew I wanted to sleep.

I closed my eyes again.

“Kusanagi! Hang in there!”

Sasakura’s voice echoed as if it was coming in the mist from the distance.

It neither reverberated nor sounded vaguely.

It was very close, but I felt it was very far.

It was like a heaven in the clouds ...

Episode 1: Sideslip “For goodness sake, let me die in peace, please.” He said.

She was about to leave, when his daughter entered the room and walked toward him to say good morning. He looked at his daughter in the way similar to how he did to his wife. She asked him how his health was. He answered drily that he would liberate all of them from him in the near future. The two women said nothing, sat there for a while, and then finally left.

This excerpt is from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* originally written in Russian by Leo Tolstoy.

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Before I was laid down on a hard bed in a medical room, I had recovered my consciousness completely. I opened my eyes wider than usual to appeal I was okay, but I could not speak properly. I thought it would be out of place and ridiculous, no

matter what I spoke. I seemed to be wounded, but not seriously. At least I knew that. All of those around me were wearing serious looks, and that was very funny. They might have thought that wearing serious looks occasionally was good for their health, just like doing stretching exercises.

“Don’t worry. It’s not serious at all.” Sasakura said, while bringing his face closer to me.

“Where? I mean, which part of my body is wounded?” I spoke. The tone might have been calm.

“The back side of your neck.” Sasakura whispered the information to me.

“Oh, I see. That’s why I cannot see it.”

“Just a scratch. I guess splinters popped, and got your neck.”

It had to be a scratch. If I was shot deep into my neck, then I would not have been able to come back here and speak anything by now.

Imagining the wound made me feel disgusted. I did not feel like lifting my hand to touch it.

“Canopy. Do you have a spare?” I asked.

“Don’t worry.” He nodded.

“Please fix it immediately.” I said. “You don’t have to be here. The only thing you can fix is an aircraft, right?”

His face was getting farther away. He seemed to be giving up. Another person was standing beside me.

My sight was getting out of focus. *I wonder if it is anemia.*

I made an effort to breathe. For a moment, I smelt the disinfectant. The smell was similar to that of fuel, but it was amazing that just a little bit of difference made such an unpleasant odor.

Then, I closed my eyes and recalled the latest dogfight. I was thinking about at what point I made a mistake and about when I had to notice it.

To begin with, trying to get too close to the enemy to have the better look at it was the first blunder. I was still surprised by the fact that such pilots still existed. It

was the biggest shock I experienced this time. What made him enable to execute that desperate act to shoot the enemy down? I could not understand it at all. I did not have that much willpower to do that. Rather, in the first place, children do not have such a feeling. I guessed that it was the type of persistence only adults had.

The sense of wonder lied in the fact that such an alien would get on an aircraft and ascend to the high sky.

Yeah, it was indeed mysterious. I cannot understand it.

I felt disgusted rather than angry. The sensation was similar to what I would have experienced when I happened to witness something weird that I did not want to see. Like I accidentally found a carcass of a cat hit by a car on the road.

Probably because my blood pressure was low, I was feeling depressed even more.

A bright sky came up to my mind.

I wonder why.

It was walking down a road on my way home from school. The straight road running through farms.

I was walking there alone. If I went back home, I would just see my mother's face that I did not want to see. I plucked the stems of long withered weeds, and waved them around. With the stems, I knocked down weeds by the roadside. In the meantime, I found the stronger stems and used them as my new weapons to replace the old. I attacked winged bugs as soon as I found them. I burdened myself with the rule, according to which I could not advance unless I destroyed and swept the order around me. In short, I just killed my time.

I heard an engine sound approaching from the top of a hill.

Is it a tractor, or a motorbike? It was a fluttering, dry putt-putt sound. It had got to be the one with a two-cycle, single-cylinder engine. As I climbed up the hill, I saw a large motorbike by the roadside. A man wearing a white shirt was sitting astride it while stretching his legs wide and straight. He lit a cigarette, pushed the lighter into a pocket of his pants, and turned toward me with the smoke.

I took my eyes off him.

I tried to pass by him.

“Suito.” He called out to stop me.

I was hesitant, passed him by after taking two or three extra steps, and looked back at him.

“You are Suito, right?”

“What?” I asked him in return.

The man grinned. A tanned face. He looked young, but had deep wrinkles on his forehead and the outer corners of his eyes. His lips surrounded by an unshaven beard were stretched sideways and warped. It was more than creepy. It was a barbaric form. I hated it.

“You have grown up.”

“Who are you?”

“Are you doing fine?”

He exhaled the smoke again, and let cloudy words flow out of his warped mouth. The voice was bubbly with liquid mixed into it. Then, the guy mentioned my mother’s name, and squinted one of his eyes.

Can't you tell whether I'm doing fine or not?

If I am not doing fine, what are you going to do about that?

I kept silent. I could vaguely guess who the guy was by then. Still, I did not want to admit it. I was staring fixedly at him as a sign of rebellion. On the other hand, I was desperately thinking about how I could escape from the situation. If I had a stronger weapon than weed stalks in my hand, a gun for example, then I would have run away while threatening him with it. However, it was just too bad that I did not have other options at the time. I bowed to him slightly, looked back, and left there. I had a humiliating feeling about bowing to him, but that did not matter to me. That was what I told myself. At least I could handle the situation this way.

Although the man seemed to be saying something, the engine sound prevented me from hearing it. The motorbike ran for the direction opposite me. After enduring the noise for several seconds, I looked back quietly and found out that the sound was fading away (and there was nothing else about it). I could not see that guy.

I felt relieved. Still, I kept standing there for a while to wait for an unidentified something. Of course, nothing appeared.

I noticed that I was having a pain in my right hand.

I found myself squeezing the stem of the weeds tightly. I opened my palm and took a look at it. Blood was oozing out. I did not know when I was injured. Injuries always occurred in this typical pattern. They sneaked around me before I knew it, and they invaded me without making me realize it. By the time I felt the pain, the injuries had become my possession and so adorable that I would feel the urge to put them into my mouth. Injuries have such an ability to cheat humans.

When crossing a bridge over a brook, I threw away the weed weapon that I had been holding. They lightly touched down on the surface of water and then flowed quietly without sinking. The engine sound of the motorbike vanished long ago. The blue sky was reflected on the surface of water, so I looked up at the sky to confirm it. I kept my finger in my mouth. I stroked the wound with my tongue in my mouth.

I saw a tiny figure of one small fighter aircraft flying straight without sound. In a short while, I was following it until it disappeared beyond a mountain.

I had wanted to pilot an airplane before that. But it must have been the first time that I recognized it as a weapon. So, I wanted to turn away the motorbike guy by getting on the airplane.

I hope that he would never come to our house again.

To make sure that he will never see my mother.

By using an aircraft, I can do that, I thought.

I cannot do so with the stems of weeds.

Even if I cannot do that as of now, I will obtain the power someday in the future. I was feeling nostalgic about myself, who was thinking so. I felt it was a bit funny.

Why didn't I want to shoot my mother sooner than to shoot that guy? Obviously, my mother would be much easier to attack as an effective target.

I cannot laugh anymore. Why?

When I opened my eyes again, I needed about five seconds to focus on the unlevel pattern on the ceiling. I moved my eyes, but I could not move my head. It seemed to be wrapped in bandages. I felt some resistance under my chin. I saw a white partition standing, and light was penetrating it. The place on the other side of the screen was brighter. I felt someone was there.

“What time is it?” I asked.

The sound of someone moving hastily. A shadow approached the partition and someone appeared from behind it. She was a young woman. The face of someone I did not know.

“Oh? Where is this?” I asked her without waiting for her to answer the previous question.

“A hospital.” She smiled with a strange voice. She was wearing a white uniform. She seemed to be a nurse. I had seen a doll like her at a toy shop.

“What time?”

“Let’s see ...” She took a look at a small wristwatch, the panel of which was placed on the inner side of her wrist. It looked like a toy as well. “It’s 09:30 p.m.”

“May I get up?”

“It is already past the lights-out time. I would like you to sleep.”

“I have slept for long hours until now. That’s impossible.” I tried to heave myself off the bed. The nurse tried to stop me. “I have to go back to the airbase.”

“No way. You must not do that.”

“Why not? Is my wound that serious?” I touched the bandage on my neck. I put my hand around it, and found out that the right side on the back of my neck was a bit swollen. But I scarcely felt any pain. “Not so serious, right?”

“Yes, you’re doing fine. However, you cannot fully recover from the injury so soon.”

“You mean, I have to stay here tonight?”

“Right. Rather than staying ..., you know, you are hospitalized.”

“Hospitalized? In this room?”

“No, not in this room. Well, I think we would like you to move to another room. You would have to do so tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t need to do that. I am going back to the base right away.” My tone might have become harsher.

I had my body face sideways and got my legs down from the bed. The nurse approached me, and was standing in front of me.

“Please, do not tell me so like that.” The nurse showed a troubled look. Then, she showed a wry smile, which looked like what she had mastered in school. “Anyway, take a rest now and take care of yourself. You should rest for a while. I think you have worked too hard.”

I stared straight at her face, and made a sigh.

Maybe, she’s right. I mean, she’s correct about the fact that there is no use for me to complain to her.

“I’m hungry. May I eat something?” I asked what came up to my mind. In fact, I was not that hungry.

“I gave you an intravenous drip infusion earlier. So, please wait a little while. I think you will get to eat something tomorrow.”

I looked at my arm. An adhesive plaster bandage was applied to the part of my left arm near the joint.

“I want to drink something.” I said. “I’m thirsty.” It was true.

“Shall I bring water to you?” The nurse leaned her head.

I nodded. If I requested coffee, or something, then it would likely not be accepted. *If anything, I would rather smoke than drink water.*

The nurse left the room. She would probably get water for me. I got out of the bed and took a look over the partition.

It was a place like a consultation room. The cabinets with glass doors were neatly lined up by a wall. Desks and round chairs were covered with white clothes. The

lighting was brighter than it was necessary, and the glossy floor was reflecting it. I walked back to the bed and found a basket below it. My jacket and pants were folded and stored in it. I pulled out the jacket and looked at the collar. Surely, the blood stain was there. I searched the chest pocket and found my identification card. But, there was no wallet. It was better for me to stay lighter, even by a bit, when I got on an aircraft. I did not bring my wallet to the cockpit. The wallet had got to be left in my room.

The long-sleeve shirt I was wearing at that point was not mine. My shirt was not in the basket. It might have gotten too smudged with blood. They might have disposed of it.

The nurse came back and I sat up straight on the bed. She was holding a plastic tray on which a plastic cup was placed. She held it out to me. It was as if I was told to drink static electricity.

“I appreciate it.” I thanked her and took the cup. I brought it to my mouth and sipped it twice. It was lukewarm water. I did not remember when I had drunk water last time.

“How do you feel?”

“Nothing wrong.” I answered without laughing. If anything, I was in a relatively good state of mind.

I had another sip of water. Since the nurse was still holding the tray, I gave her back the cup, which was still about two-thirds full of water. She walked to a side table to place the tray on it.

Someone was knocking the door quietly.

A man with a pair of glasses was entering the room. He was wearing a white coat. *A doctor*, I guessed. He was not the type of character that I would see in a toy shop very often. He saw me and made a smile, which looked as if it was vanishing into the darkness.

“How are you feeling?” He asked in a low voice. His throat might be like a limestone cave.

“Not bad.” I could not say that I had already answered the same question just then. “Well, doctor, I think that I don’t need to be hospitalized with such a minor

injury.”

“Well, tomorrow, we are planning to conduct a close examination again.” He said so, while looking at the back of my neck and touching it. It was so close to my ear, and made me shudder a bit. “By the way, Ms. Kusanagi, there is a visitor for you. Would you like to meet her?”

“Who is the visitor?”

“Her name is Ms. Kai.”

“Ah.” I nodded. “I would like to meet her.”

“Okay. Then, I will let her come here.”

“No, sir, I will meet her by getting out of this room after changing clothes.” I said. “I can’t meet her here.”

“What’s the problem?”

“It is a confidential matter.”

The doctor was looking into my face.

“May I not?” I raised my chin.

“Yes, you may.” He nodded and smiled.

“Thank you, doctor.”

The doctor whispered something to the nurse and left the room. He came here just to tell me about Kai. The nurse stepped back behind the partition.

I pulled out the basket from under the bed and put on the trousers. Then, I put on the shoes and tied their shoestrings. During the movement, I felt a slight sense of incongruity on the backside of my neck. Since I did not have my own shirt, I shoved into the trousers the hospital clothes I was given here and put on the jacket smeared with blood. It had already dried up completely and the blood was not somebody else’s. *It is mine.*

“Where can I meet her?” I stepped out of the partition, and asked the nurse.

“I will usher you over to the place.” She, who had been standing by the door, opened it for me. It was a gesture to urge me to go out first. “It is three floors below here. Would you like to use the elevator?”

“Either way.” I replied.

We chose to use the stairs nearby. The building was old and the stairs were dimly lit.

“Are you okay?” The nurse turned around and was looking up at me.

“This is not the first time for me to use a stairway.” I answered with a serious look. She chuckled. I was glad she understood my joke.

“Aircraft?” She asked in a low voice.

“Excuse me?” I did not understand what she meant. Probably, she figured out my occupation from my clothes. Letters and a logotype were printed on the jacket around the chest part.

“Do you fly an airplane?”

“I do.”

While being impressed with the simplicity of our conversation, I was climbing down the stairs, step by step. We entered the hallway and crossed a bright lobby. A dead silence reigned, but a few employees inside the counter were all staring at us. We reached behind the counter, and the nurse opened a wooden door for me. The other side of the door was brighter.

Kai, who had been sitting on a sofa, stood up. She turned around and looked at me. The nurse bowed by the door and closed it from outside.

I approached Kai and made a salute.

“Long time no see.” She raised her hand. “You seem to be doing fine.”

“Nothing wrong at all.” I responded, while standing upright.

“Have a seat.” Kai said, while sitting down.

“Thank you.” I sat on another sofa opposite hers over the table.

“Tell me honestly. How do you feel?”

“I just woke up a little while ago. After getting a plenty of sleep, I am feeling good.”

“How is your wound?”

“It’s not that serious.” I shook my head.

“The doctor said so, too. Still, you have to get through close examinations.”

“I heard they would do it tomorrow.”

Kai drew up a purse on a chair toward her, and took a cigarette out of it.

“Would you like to smoke?” She was looking sideways at me.

“If it is okay, yes.” I nodded.

“That’s unusual of you.” She smiled. Then she put a pack of cigarette and a lighter on the table.

I reached for them and picked up one from the pack. The lighter was slim, and looking luxurious. It did not look durable. Even though the flame was small, it served enough purpose. I exhaled the smoke. I was feeling the slight sense of levitation.

Kai pulled out a folded newspaper from the purse and slid it toward me on the table. Then, she pinched her cigarette, lit it, and crossed her legs again. Although it was usual and nothing new, I could see nothing but her confidence around her. Maybe, she burnt off other things long ago, or she forcefully thrust them into her pockets. *I understand that, probably because my life might be similar to hers.*

After exhaling the smoke, I spread the newspaper. What she wanted me to read did not seem to be the main article on the front page. A small photograph was next to it. A male pilot standing in front of an aircraft. He was wearing a beard and smiling audaciously. *Of course, I have seen him.*

As I slowly lifted my head, I saw Kai. While narrowing her eyes, Kai exhaled a thin streak of smoke, and raised one of her eyebrows a bit.

“The man whom you shot down was once the ace pilot.”

“Yes. This is the one.” I nodded.

“What?” Kai widened her eyes. “Did you see him?”

“I did.”

“Oh ...” While raising her chin, she sat back on the sofa. “You have a good eyesight.”

“I see ... I now know that it was not Sakuragi’s fault.” I uttered. “Ma’am, what is his name?”

“I don’t know his real name. But he was called the Joker.”

“Joker.” I repeated the name, while recalling his dauntless smile with white teeth. “But, he used to be the top-flight pilot in the past, right?”

“He used to be, you just said?”

“Yes.” I nodded slightly. “I admit he was flying stably in his most recent flight. But, I did not think he was that special.”

“It is because you are so special, Kusanagi.”

“No, I don’t think so. Actually, in the end, the five aircrafts of the approximately same performances failed to shoot down two aircrafts.”

“I guess he was not yet familiar with the new type of aircraft.”

“How can you say so?” I tilted my head. “To begin with, how do you know the fact that this Joker was shot down?”

“We can understand anything, at least to that extent.” Kai smiled and exhaled the smoke. “If the Boomerang was shot down, then they would make a big buzz out of it.”

Boomerang was my codename. *Okay, that’s the way it is*, I rethought. *There are spies on both sides, and they know each other about many issues.*

At the time, the notion of spy reminded me of my former friend only for a moment. But I hastily put it away in a drawer in my mind.

“Well. It appears that he is no longer considered to be the ace pilot these days.” Kai took a glance at the newspaper, and continued. “He was not a Kildren, so it might have been the matter of his age. At certain age, the physical strength and the ability to focus start declining.” She looked downward once and touched her shoe. Then, she raised her head and was staring at me. “Of course, even a Kildren cannot stay on top as the ace pilot forever.”

I could not quite understand the direction that the topic of her conversation was taking. I caught Kai’s gaze and was thinking without saying anything. *What topic on earth does she come to talk about at this time of the day? Would there any problem for her, if she*

puts it off till tomorrow?

As if she was reading my mind, she smiled with confidence and exhaled the smoke.

“You may want to stay hospitalized for a while to take a rest.” It was an unexpected statement. For several seconds, I kept watching her mouth that emitted the words.

“Why do you say so, ma’am? I don’t think I need to do that.”

“Still, this is our operation.” Kai got up and wore a cold expression on her face again. “You are no longer an ordinary pilot. “For our company, you are ...”

Her words were broken off in the middle.

“I am ... what am I?” I asked.

“I have thought that I should not say this.” Kai snuffed out the cigarette in an ashtray on the table. “But ... Umm, you know. Anyway, it does not have any negative meaning in a bad way.”

“What am I?”

“Weapon.”

“Oh.” I understood it in an instant and nodded. *Indeed.*

“That’s not what we want to lose in vain. You know that, right?”

“I will follow the order, ma’am. But, I cannot stand the situation in which I cannot fly.”

“Only for a short while.” Kai nodded.

“How long?”

“Tentatively, for two weeks.”

“As long as two weeks?” I tried to stand up. But a part of my body clung to the sofa, and prevented me from doing so. “And then?”

“Who is the number two pilot in your airbase now?”

“What do you mean?”

“We just want to take the safety into account as carefully as we can, when you fly,

Kusanagi.”

“I do not think that you need to worry about that, ma’am.”

“We do not worry.” Kai smiled, and slowly shook her head sideways. “This is all about enhancing the accuracy.”

“As a weapon?”

“Yes, as a weapon.”

She smiled.

I found myself smiling, too.

-3-

Next day I was transferred to a single room. Surrounded by mayonnaise-colored, boring walls, I had nothing to do. I told the nurse that I wanted to go out to buy some books. But she said she would go instead of me and asked me to tell her what the book titles were. I had never cared to know book titles and could not even mention just one of those books I had read. *How can I know the title of a book I have yet to read? Is she good at having such type of memory, just as much as she is at remembering patients' names because of her occupation as a nurse?*

I asked her whether I could go out of the building as long as I stayed within the premises. She left the room, while telling me that she would get the clothes to wear for me. In other words, she did not want me to walk outside the room with the combat uniform on.

The served meal was normal. The medical examination by the doctor was completed in an instant. When he was examining my wound, I was looking downward without words and looking at my knees. They were the shapes that were telling the existences of the bones inside them. I thought they might have become thin. I was not sure of which knees of mine at what age I was comparing the current knees with. But I remembered that they were in a simpler shape when I was a child. *Should I eat more? On the other hand, the lighter the pilot is, the bigger advantage the pilot gets.*

As she promised, the nurse brought to me something that I could wear. They

were sweat pants and a jersey jacket, which made me feel like jogging. It was all in gray. I felt as if I were becoming a prisoner or an actor who had to play the role of a lunatic. Even so, it was still better than playing the role of a sick person.

I got out of the room, climbed down the stairs, and found many elderly people in the waiting area of a spacious lobby. They were looking upward to watch TV attached on a wall without words. This was the general ward. I was a bit surprised by the fact. Surely, I was not willing to walk around in such a place while wearing the military uniform.

A female receptionist was looking at me. I approached her and asked her if there was a proper place outside where I could do gymnastic exercises. She frowned for a moment, and pointed at the far end of the corridor, while telling me that it was warm and not windy in the backyard. Although I wanted to feel the wind, I could do nothing but thank her and head for the direction.

I could see the inner courtyard through the windows of the corridor. I pushed a heavy steel door like a lid of a treasure chest, and got out of the building.

There was nostalgic air outside.

In the end, "outside" is connected with each other all around the world.

The sky, too.

I took a deep breath several times. I had hardly felt it could be this refreshing on the ground. *Within a span of one day, where have I been?*

Although it was supposed to be an inner courtyard, the space was not surrounded by buildings. A forest on an elevated ground was dominating the north side. A stone wall stood at the nearest edge of the higher forest ground. The garden was laid with a lawn and there was a bench. Under a broadleaf tree with widely spread branches, fallen leaves were already accumulated.

I looked around and found no one. I turned back to see the windows of the building, but I could not find anyone at least in my sight.

Why don't I just escape? I thought.

The stone wall is about two meters high. I can climb it by jumping on it. After entering the forest, I just keep on running. And then ... Contemplating the possibility itself was

interesting. I might have smiled just a little bit.

I had nothing to do. I sat on the bench and looked up at the sky.

My eyes accepted the dazzling scenery immediately.

The clouds were floating high and the visibility was good.

I felt as if my feet were shaken.

I wanted to make a rolling maneuver to the right and left.

I was feeling these inconveniences, unnaturalness, and wonders of not being able to move freely.

I want to fly.

I want to leave.

Right now, if possible.

It was not dazzling anymore. Compared to the sky I saw on a regular basis, it was much less glaring. Even though it appeared to be sunny, it was actually murky near the ground. The light reaching all the way to this level was like a beaten boxer. Even if he raised his hand, he would have already lost the energy.

I heard a door being opened, and turned around.

A boy with his head wrapped in bandages was standing there. He looked around absent-mindedly, finally noticed me, and kept himself still. I saw the nurse inside of the window behind him, and she seemed to be watching him worriedly.

The boy took his eyes off me. He was looking at the ground. He might have been staring at his feet. Before long, he started walking while looking downward. He appeared to be confirming each of his steps, as if it seemed strange to him that he could make both of his feet move forward alternately. After getting beside the bench, he slightly lifted his head to turn his eyes toward me.

He saw my face, directed the line of his sight downward again, and then looked at the bench. He did not say anything. *Does he want to ask me if it is okay for him to sit down here? Perhaps, he may not possess the ability to speak.*

I moved to the other side of the bench without a word to provide space for him to sit down. He squinted, hastily looked around once, and finally gazed up at the

sky. Then, after he looked at me once again, he sat down. After sitting there, he was just gazing into the sky without turning toward me.

He appeared to be still young. The white lines from his cheeks to his chin were those of a child. Almost all of his hair was hidden under the bandages. The muscle of his thin arms had grown weak and his fingers were clearly showing the shapes of the bones under the skin. They were now on his knees and standing by in the shape of holding something that might not have existed in this world.

I looked up at the sky, too. I found small dots above the clouds. No sound. They were fairly high in altitude. *Aircrafts. There are three of them. Not passenger airplanes. Those who are flying close to each other like that have got to be bombers, and nothing else.*

I looked sideways and checked what the boy was looking at. He also seemed to be watching them.

“How many?” I asked.

“Three.” The boy answered immediately.

I directed my attention to his knees, and noticed that his right hand, which had been assuming the pose as if it was trying to grab something in the air, was now being clenched with his thumb facing upward. He appeared to be grabbing something that did not exist in this world. I understood what it was. It was definitely in the shape of holding the control stick.

“Have you ever piloted an aircraft?” I asked.

“I don’t remember.” After answering so quietly, he looked at me.

The jet-black, clear eyes.

In them, I see the sky.

I can plunge into it.

“How did you receive the injury?”

“They tell me that I went down,” He answered immediately. His response was very quick. It was exactly the contrasting opposite of his body movements.

“They told you? Where did you go down?”

“I don’t know.” The boy looked at the sky. “Probably ...”

But, no matter how long I waited, he did not say the rest of the answer.

“You were lucky, weren’t you? I mean, your injury has turned out to be not so serious.”

“Umm ... You think so?”

I did not understand well the meaning of the word “lucky”. I used it even though I did not know the meaning. It was an incantation to utter when I wanted to favorably recognize the past events that could not be rewritten anymore. It had almost the same meaning as the phrase “Kiss it and make it well.” that adults often chanted when children got hurt.

“From where did you fall?” He looked at me again and asked.

“No, I didn’t go down. I have never fallen.”

“Really ...” He nodded. “The floating feeling makes me feel good. It gives me a sense of freedom.”

“While you are going down?”

“Floating sensation.” The boy lifted his arms slightly. The motion made me think that he could actually float his body in the air.

“So, you remember the feeling that you experienced while falling toward the surface?”

“I see that in the dream.”

“Oh, I see your point.” I nodded. “Isn’t that what anyone might experience. It is about knowing the feeling of the fall without having actually experiencing the fall.”

“I wonder why.” The boy tilted his head.

“Maybe, we have known that since the day we were born.”

When answering so, I was looking at my shoes instead of the sky. I felt as if something, which fell here from the sky a long time ago, were still there. It was a transient illusion of nostalgia.

In the first place, human beings might have fallen from the sky.

That is what being born to this world is about.

Are we afraid of falling, maybe because we do not want to be born again?

If so, when we die, would we be ascending?

Where to?

-4-

On the following day, I met the boy on the rooftop. A nurse was standing by near him to accompany.

The rooftop was surrounded by fences, which were taller than an average human, and nets were spread above the space. The safety design was taken into account by so much that we could even play basketball here. Come to think of it, a stopper was attached to the window of the patient's room, to make sure that it could not be opened any wider than by about 10 centimeters. It was designed to prevent the patient from jumping off from the window. I doubted there was anyone who wanted to jump off from such a low place. I wondered if ordinary people felt it was high enough for the purpose of reaching the heaven.

If you want to die like that, you might as well climb up anything at least as tall as a high-voltage transmission tower.

If you do not make that much of the minimal effort, God will dislike you.

If there is a place which is sucked up into the outer space, then everybody can fall to the heaven from it. The place would become a very popular suicide spot.

It was an idea that I had come up with when I was a younger child. *Even now, I am still reminded of the idea, when I see a tornado.*

The boy was sitting on a frame of an air conditioning unit and was looking at the sky. I had just come up here to smoke a cigarette that the nurse gave me. I brought an ashtray, too. I was hesitant about emitting the smoke near him, so I lit a cigarette while leaning back on a wall beside the door of a penthouse.

There was nothing in the sky. No cloud.

In this case, where should I think the heaven is located?

The boy noticed me, stood up, and came to me. He stopped in front of me and

made a slight salute. While holding the cigarette with my lips, I did it, too. The same saluting hand took the cigarette off my mouth.

“What is the deal here?” I asked.

“I hear that you are a pilot for a fighter aircraft.”

“I am.” I nodded. No change in the facial expression. He probably heard that from someone. Who could the provider of information be, other than the nurses? There apparently was no sense of privacy in the hospital.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t tell you so. I heard your name as well.”

“Really.” I responded. “What is yours?”

“Kannami is my name.” He answered. “Maybe, I think it is. You know, everyone calls me with the name.”

“Kannami.” I repeated his name.

“Have you ever met me before?”

“Never.” I answered. Then, I opened my palm. “Let us talk no further. It is the rule.”

“Okay. Since I remember nothing, I cannot talk about anything even if I want to.”

“I understand the situation. It happens. Well, do you have any trouble if you don’t remember anything?”

“No.” He shook his head horizontally and smiled a bit. “However, I’m just worried about whether I will be able to pilot an airplane again.”

“You can.”

The boy started wearing a somewhat nervous expression on his face, and looked up at the sky once. When he directed his face upward, he closed his eyes as if he was clicking the shutter of a camera. He turned his face toward me and then opened his eyes. I felt the sky was reflected in his pupils.

“You are a famous pilot.”

“Oh, do you remember that?”

“No. Not really. That is what I heard.”

“Who told you such a thing?”

I looked back. A nurse was standing at a spot far from where I was. She was watching us. A small-sized young woman. Not the nurse I knew. She was probably the one who told the boy about me.

“I have a favor to ask you.” He said.

“What is it?”

“Could you show me your hand?” The boy held out his hand.

“My hand?” I showed him my right hand. “Are you reading the lines on my palm?”

He touched my hand softly with his fingers. From the back of my hand to my fingertips.

I felt it was a little funny. I was watching his face. He was glaring at my hand with a serious expression. Then, he suddenly raised his face, looked up at me, and smiled happily with a delay.

“Thank you.” He said.

“So, what is the reading about?”

“A beautiful hand.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

Silence.

Both of us were watching each other’s pupils.

What is this?

A mysterious feeling was welling up in my mind.

I felt as if something were flying in the direction toward which he was directing his attention. In other words, it appeared to be flying in my pupils. I too was chasing something in his pupils. *There is the sky. It has no cloud, and it is entirely in sky blue. Something small, and moving like dots. I seek for them. The routes. Straight lines and*

curves. Smooth. Occasionally white. Sometimes twinkling. The traces. Fixing the eyes on them, chasing them. Smoothly moving eyes. The pupils are moving. Like they are floating. The air as transparent as water. The smoothness is beyond density. Like sliding. Slowly, but without stopping even for a moment. Because they are flying. Yes, flying. We are seeing something flying in each other's pupils.

As the nurse was approaching, we took our eyes off each other. He seemed to be looking up at the sky. I checked my feet again. I felt some sort of premonition of falling to the spot, like a chill running down my spine because of its unpleasant sensation or the comfort.

What is this?

Is it something I once dropped?

However.

The reality, which did not resemble at all those I saw in his pupils, spread over from my feet. Everything seemed to be clinging to the ground, while being almost buried. Catching the sand and gravel in it slimily. It was disguised as the ground and the asphalt, like it was trying to hide. Then, it pretended to be my shadow, and was twining around me. On a regular basis, I always dragged the subtle resistance from the shadow.

The nurse said something to the boy. She was probably telling him that it was time for him to go back to the room. I could not catch the exact words. Through the door the nurse just opened, he vanished into the penthouse. He seemed to be looking back at me, but it was too dark to see his face well. The action of his looking back itself might have been just my imagination.

I was left alone on the rooftop.

I looked at my right hand that he had touched.

Then, I looked at my left hand.

The cigarette was between the fingers, and its fire was gone before I knew it.

During the night, a nurse came to my hospital room, and told me that I was

having a phone call. I got out the room and followed her to the nurse station on the same floor. There was a door inside the counter. The telephone was in the adjacent room beyond the door. There were many drawers on the wall. *Do they contain drugs, or documents?*

The call was from Sasakura.

“How are you doing?”

“Fine, thank you.”

“That’s good. If I have some time, I think I will be able to see you, maybe tomorrow.”

“Where are you calling from?”

“That particular café”

“Where is this place?”

“What do you mean by this place?”

“The hospital where I am currently in.”

“Oh, that’s on the outskirts of an adjoining town.”

“How long will it take?”

“An hour and a little more by motorbike, I guess.”

“Do you know why I am being hospitalized in such a place?”

“Don’t worry about such matters. Is there anything that you want me to bring there?”

“An aircraft.”

“Anything else?”

“Books.”

“What kind of books?”

“They are piled up on the desk in my room. There are four books in total.”

“I’m not allowed to enter Kusanagi’s room.”

“I guess Goda will open it, if you ask him.”

“I can’t do that. I cannot say that I am planning to meet you. He will never give me permission.”

“Then, why don’t you say you want to retrieve from me the books that you lent me?”

“But, you know, I don’t read books.”

“Goda doesn’t know that.”

“Umm.” Sasakura groaned. “I surrender. I wish they were books related to engines or something like that.”

“A collection of poems, a novel, and two biographies.”

“Collection of poems? Yuck.”

“If you don’t like it, you can just come here, and bring here just your kind heart.”

“Okay, I will bring the books. Anything else?”

“Let’s see. Do you have photos of Sanka?”

“What? Why?”

“You know, I want to post it on a wall in my hospital room.” Telling a lie made the tone of my voice a bit murky.

“But, if you do that, you might be regarded as a weirdo.”

“By whom?”

“Nurses or someone like that.”

“I see.”

“They already think that is what you are, eh?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Will it take such a long time for you to be discharged from the hospital, to the level that you can read such amount of books?”

“I have no idea.”

“Anyway, take a long, good rest.”

“Is the canopy repaired?”

“Yeah. I have replaced it with a new one. Additionally, there was a hole on the rudder.”

“If that’s all the damage that I got, then I was lucky.”

“It’s unusual for you to say such a thing.” Sasakura laughed. “Did they give you a shot of tranquilizer or something?”

The notion of injection reminded me of the nurse. I looked back and found her watching me from outside.

“I gotta hang up and go.”

“Okay. Good night. Then, see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

I put the telephone down. I bowed to the nurse, and walked in the corridor with the feeling as if I were becoming a doll. *How polite this Suito Kusanagi is. Since when has she become docile like this? She might be looking like an inpatient. Still, it seems to be sure that she is glad to get a call from Sasakura.*

-6-

I woke up in the middle of the night.

I saw the ceiling in the dark patient’s room.

It was brighter near the window. *What is the source of the light?*

I put my legs down from the bed, and thrust my toes halfway into my shoes. I stood up and walked quietly to the window.

Many lights were turned on. They were not facing toward me. Still, overwhelming lights were leaking. I had not even noticed that such a facility was here.

I opened the window. It did not open widely enough. I could not get my head out of the window. Still, the cold air was sweet and comfortable. The wind velocity was about two meters, probably. I looked upward, and found the starlit sky to be shining as lively as it was visually noisy.

I heard a small sound behind me. I looked back.

Again, I heard the same sound.

I walked to the door. It's unlocked. I opened the door. A white face was right in front of me. His front hair was hung down on his forehead. Below it, I saw two pupils that reflected the light faintly. They were blinking silently.

The pupils that know the sky.

The pupils that know the outer space.

"Kannami." I called the boy's name. "What's up? At such a late hour."

"Have you been staying awake?"

"Yeah."

"Please get dressed. We are going outside." The boy said. I noticed that he was wearing the uniform. I read his military rank slide that was attached to the chest of the uniform. It was two ranks lower than mine.

"Why? Are you okay with your injury?"

The boy nodded. He raised a hand to make a courteous salute.

I closed the door once, and then put on my clothes. The idea that I had to do something else attacked me from behind like gravity, but I managed to shake it off. *What does he want me to do? I know the only thing I have to do.*

It's flying.

The boy's salute was obviously indicating that.

For some reason, it was the only interpretation I had.

Definitely.

In the final phase, I sat on the bed, bent a knee, and laced my shoe tightly. Then, I do the same to the other shoe as well. *Once I reach the sky, I don't need to worry about the shoelaces. At the same time, it is difficult for me to tie them again in the sky. It must be the symbol of the fact that I am now on the ground. Each time I get out of the bed in the morning, I am assured of the fact that I am on the ground. I have tied the shoelaces many times. After tying them, I leave the ground.*

I opened the door and went outside. The boy was standing at the corner of the corridor. He was a bit taller than I. His weight might be lighter than mine. He was

just thin by that much.

“Let’s go.” He said.

“Where to?”

“Come with me.” He showed his back to me.

He was wearing a new uniform. It had never been bloodstained.

I was following the boy’s brilliant, clean upper back.

We climbed down the stairs. It was in the dead of the night. Although I did not check the clock before leaving the room, I guessed that it was at around 03:00 a.m. We met no one on the way. The lobby counter was still dimly lit, but we did not see anyone there.

The boy was getting out through the front entrance. I followed him. We descended an asphalt slope, and headed for a gate. We saw bright lights on the right side in the distance. They were the lights that I had seen from my room. Not the single light. A lot of lights were there. Buildings, however, could not be recognized.

We went through the gate, crossed a roadway, and ascended a sloping sidewalk. There was no automobile running. It seemed that there was no house in and around this area. Several warehouse-like huge buildings with rusty shutters closed were standing, side by side. No signboard.

The air was very chilly. I was wearing only a uniform over a shirt. It was so cold that I wanted a scarf and a pair of gloves. Still, such a thing to that extent did not matter at all. Even in a cockpit, there was no gauge that was designed for displaying my body temperature. All we had to do was to check the oil pressure and oil temperature.

I was gazing at the starlit sky fixedly. I was convinced that it was surely at around 03:00 a.m. I turned back to see the hospital building, but only the silhouette could be seen. No light was lit on any window. I saw red lights blinking on the rooftop. That’s all.

At the end of the sidewalk sloping upward, a scenery appeared ahead of us. I first saw fences near us. Maybe, it was made with concrete. With the height of about three meters, it stretched to the left and right. Many graffiti and posters decorated it.

On top of it, barbed wires were overhung while leaning toward us. All the lights were overflowing from the far end of the place beyond the fence. The sweet lights oozed out from the night air. The roofs of small buildings all looked black. A little far from them, I could see a round building. Probably, a hangar, I guessed. My feet were gradually getting lighter. I felt as if I could climb up the stairway in the sky.

At a small gate, the boy made a salute toward a night security guard. He looked at me and made a salute quickly. The two of us entered the premises. We crossed the front yard diagonally, and walked along the path on the grass. At that point, I was looking at nothing but the hangar in front of us. I had yet to see a runway, but it probably stretched beyond the building on the left. I looked up at the sky, and read the wind.

The boy turned back only once and looked at my face. I let my gaze meet his in a moment, but said nothing. *We don't need words.*

The hangar was approaching. The shutter had been open. The white light from inside vaguely drew curves and radial lines on the flat concrete surface.

Finally, I saw the runway. Three high lighting poles. And then, lights were dotted and lined along the runway.

In the hangar, two Sankas were moored.

The paint job was done in camouflage, in vivid navy blue and light blue-gray.

There is something unusual about this, I felt immediately.

It was different from the usual Sanka that I knew.

I approached them, and walked around one of them. The same, old shape. They were armed with the same weapons. Judging from the propellers that were designed the same, I guessed that the engine had not changed as well. The shape of the canopy and the notches of the control surfaces were also the same.

But, when I touched the body gently, I recognized the difference.

“Oh? What’s this?” I uttered.

“It’s not metal.” The boy answered behind me.

I turned back and looked at him. He was already wearing a helmet. Then, he handed another helmet to me.

I wanted to scrutinize the meaning of his remark, "It's not metal." I wanted to experience the not-so-cold feeling of making contact with the airframe more. But, once I was given the helmet, I could not do things like thrusting it into my pocket. I put it on my head and adjusted the goggles.

"Is it okay if I fly?" I asked casually.

It was a natural question.

"Of course." The boy smiled while showing his white teeth. "Let's fly together."

Together?

The word sounded strange to me.

I might have heard a word with such a tone for the first time.

Always, we are alone when ascending to the sky.

Even when several aircrafts are flying in formation, we cannot even go hand in hand together.

This airplane classified as a fighter aircraft was not designed for accommodating two aircrews. It did not require two personnel. If we had another one, he would not be able to do anything. Likewise, any other person could not do anything about my own life. I would never live hand in hand with anyone. I could say it was already the different situation from my own living. Would the situation in which I live with someone else be closer to my death than to my life? *That's right. Once I die, I can go to the place where everyone else is at. I will be buried and assimilate into the surroundings. In the heaven, I will be with others. Being hand in hand. Although I'm not sure, I think I wouldn't be alone in the heaven. I feel that way.*

Probably.

So, the sound of the boy's remark this time was really shocking to me. I might have been surprised by myself, who was feeling that way. I thought it was a completely new emotion. *Mysterious and a bit unstable.*

I entered the cockpit and fastened the seatbelt. The boy's aircraft was pulled out first. The engine started, and a small amount of white smoke was floating. The propellers started rotating, as if they were checking the pitch control. After the control surfaces were checked, it moved toward the runway.

Next, mine was pulled out of the hangar. The carburetor inhaled the superb night

air into which the sweet exhaust diffused, and the twittering, fascinating starter lured out the engine.

The subtle vibration is comfortable.

After checking the meters, I closed the canopy.

A worker ran to the side. The wheels of the landing gears were unlocked. My left hand gently stroked the throttle. The propellers responded to it and softly pushed the aircraft forward.

Delightful vibration. The light was shining beautifully on the aircraft from beside me. It was the direction of the control tower.

The boy got the clearance, and took off.

Then, I was waiting at the edge of the runway. Immediately, I got the green light.

I was slowly pushing up the throttle.

Okay, good boy. Let's enjoy this.

The disgusting tire sound would vanish, after I endured it for a brief moment.

I am now being taken away from every dirty thing.

I am ascending to the sky.

I shook the wings to the left and right.

I pitched the aircraft a little bit.

I checked the touch of the control surfaces.

Light.

Like I am really floating.

“Light, isn’t it?” The boy’s voice through the radio.

“Yep, light.” I responded. “Ridiculously light.”

Climbing up more and more. I was ascending at a sharp angle, side by side, with his aircraft.

No dragging at all.

I felt as if I could continue to ascend forever.

I might even be able to reach the outer space.

“Well, may I position myself behind your back for a while?” He asked.

“Try to do so, if you can.” I laughed.

The boy’s aircraft flipped to the right. I saw it, and rolled mine slowly. I assumed the inverted flight by orienting the aircraft upside-down, and followed his flight trace.

He made an excellent loop, and was ascending toward me.

If an aircraft is light by this much, anyone can do that.

His aircraft was approaching me.

I checked behind me on both right and left sides. I pushed up the throttle and, at the same time, lowered the flaps slowly.

Will he notice this?

He will shoot in three seconds.

One, two, three.

Full up.

I choked the engine in a moment, and deflected the rudders and ailerons to the opposite directions.

The sound of the air being sheared.

My aircraft faced downward. *Neutral. Full throttle again.*

I saw the boy’s aircraft diagonally below me.

Is he still at such a coordinate?

“Awesome! What was it?” He asked.

“Stop talking, and get out of there. Or, you will be shot.” I replied.

He was now within my shooting range completely.

“Bratatat.” I shouted. “Too slow.”

The boy’s aircraft fluttered to the left.

I was escaping to the right.

After he made a spiral loop, he was ascending vertically.

I too started entering the loop.

Really light.

I laughed.

I love this!

There has never been an aircraft like this.

While making a roll, I was turning horizontally.

“Come on again.” I said.

“Thank you, ma’am.” The boy responded.

So, how will you restart?

He ascended rapidly. While looking at him sideways, I had my aircraft point upward, too.

Will he pretend to start making a loop, while doing the opposite thing by ascending with his aircraft oriented upside-down? I see. His skill is something. I easily dodged it diagonally, and made an outside loop.

After he danced with the twisting motion, he rolled over to the right and cut into it. It was a fairly risky course. I faced downward to adjust my position in a moment, and made a roll to the right. *Up*. Then, one-quarter stall turn. I pretended to escape to the left, but went down to the right. From the upside-down position, I executed the Immelmann turn.

The pace was getting fast.

This is fun!

I made a feint maneuver like the cobra with a bit of twist, and dove.

I read the meter. The oil pressure is normal.

I choked the throttle. *Snap roll.*

Light.

I stopped for a moment right before entering the next move, and then lunged forward while keeping the inverted orientation.

Exactly when he was making a roll, I pulled up and approached him from below.

He noticed it, and made a roll. *Going up.*

“With the response you just showed, you just got the passing grade.” I uttered.

I went downward to follow him.

He is trying to dodge me by stalling.

I'm sure that he is getting the flaps down.

Now, he's coming.

His aircraft pointed upward.

I put the elevators in the pull-up maneuver, too. I felt the acceleration on my body.

Neutral. I adjusted the attitude with the rudders.

I was sliding obliquely.

I used the torque a bit.

Now.

Pull-up with the elevator.

High throttle.

I saw his aircraft right in front of me.

“Bratat!” I made the sound.

Escape.

His aircraft stalled and spiraled around.

He was going down.

“Thank you. Good acting.” I laughed again.

He was spinning and falling all the way to the altitude far below me.

I had my aircraft slanted at an angle, and was watching him.

Right below was the runway. Buildings looked small. His aircraft was approaching them. Spinning like a windmill.

“That’s enough.” I said.

But, he was not stopping.

“Neutral! Get it back once! What’s happening?”

No response.

I looked at my right hand.

The thumb was standing by on the control stick.

I didn’t push it, did I? I asked myself.

It can’t be.

I swang the wing to the opposite direction, and looked at what was the deal right below me again.

Check.

“Enough! Stop it! Hey, don’t fool around!”

He kept descending more and more.

He was beginning to look small.

My aircraft was also diving diagonally with a touch of sliding.

“Kannami!” I shouted.

A black dot was swallowed up into a dark meadow beside the runway.

Suddenly, I could no longer hear any sound.

I felt as if my whole body were coldly frozen.

I started shivering.

“Kannami ...”

My voice also started quivering.

He dove into such a dark meadow.

Stop it ...

Although I was supposed to be seeing the runway, the dark ceiling was right in front of me when I opened my eyes.

Nothing was moving in my sight.

I heard my own breath.

I felt my sweat running down on the forehead.

I got up.

I was on the bed.

Taking a deep breath.

“You, stupid idiot.” I whispered in a low voice. “Stop fooling around.”

My heart was still beating fast.

The sweat was running down on my cheeks.

No, that's not sweat.

My eyes are crying.

By themselves.

What's this?

If it's just a dream.

Why am I suffering from such an agony?

Dark.

This place is too dark.

I let my legs down from the bed to the floor, and thrust my toes halfway into the shoes. Outside the window was dark, too. I approached it and looked outside.

The glass pane was properly transparent.

It was a deadly silent night.

There was no runway around here.

-7-

I could not sleep until dawn, so I was looking outside the window absent-mindedly. I was feeling as if I was in an aquarium. *If the window can be opened a little*

wider, it would have been better. Will they remove the window stopper, if I promise I won't jump off the window? I checked the window, and realized that I could remove it by myself only with a cross slot screwdriver. *I should ask Sasakura for it,* I thought.

When breakfast was brought to my room, I was getting sleepy instead. So, I was dozing off in my bed without having it. I might have said I would not eat it, when a staff came to check how I was doing. When I woke up again, the breakfast was cleared off completely.

A doctor came to me after 10:00 a.m., and he asked how I was doing. I answered that I couldn't be doing any better than that. After he left, I stuck out my tongue toward the door. After that, I heard someone knocking the door. I responded, and Sasakura entered the room. Not in a dirty jumpsuit. He was wearing a somewhat gentleman-like attire, and it took me by surprise a bit. He was holding a flower bouquet in his hand. The flowers were like red roses. *Actually, they might be roses.*

"Well, you know, this is an official visitation." He laid the bouquet on a cabinet. "I thought dried flowers would be better, but I knew they wouldn't be suitable in a patient's room. Still, I didn't have enough courage to bring artificial flowers here."

I wondered why he was saying this and that, but I could accept it because it was funny. I was listening to him without saying anything. He got a paper bag down on the floor and took books out of it. He put them on the cabinet as well.

"I brought them as you wish. I lied to Goda and managed to get into your room. I had never felt that guilty for a long time. When I was attending a junior high school, I once tried to take machine parts out of a vending machine by destroying it. Probably, the biggest guilt since then."

"They are totally different subjects." I commented. I was leaning against a wall on the bed.

"Then, I bought cigarettes." He put two packs of cigarettes on the books.

"Thank you."

"Are you allowed to smoke in this facility?"

"I do so in the lobby or on the rooftop."

Sasakura looked around and found a chair by the window. He moved toward it,

glanced at the view outside the window, and sat down while facing me.

“Don’t you have a screwdriver?”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“How could I have brought it here?” Sasakura angled his lips slanted. “If I carry such a thing, that would turn me into a dangerous guy.”

“I mean, I want to remove the window stopper over there. I am frustrated because it prevents me from opening the window widely all the way. I’m being suffocated.”

The “I’m being suffocated.” part just came out of my head impulsively. I did not make such a big deal out of it.

“Can’t you just borrow it from a nurse?”

“They would think I might commit suicide. They never lend it to me.”

“Ah, I see. I now understand what it means. I thought it was to guard the room from thieves.”

“Thieves can’t climb up to this height.”

“Wait a second.”

He stood up and thrust his hands into the pockets. He was using his hands to search them for something. His movement was clumsy, so I understood that he was not going to perform a magic trick. I got mentally prepared to clap my hands for him, if he somehow conjured up a screwdriver.

The thing he took out of the pocket was a coin. He showed it to me, looked at the window, and then brought his face closer to the frame.

“Can you do it with such a thing?”

Sasakura did not answer. In the meantime, I got out of the bed and walked to the cabinet to check out the books on it. Then, I unwrapped the bouquet. On a side table, there was a pot with water that a nurse had brought here. There is a water glass as well. After contemplating a little, I took the lid of the pot off and inserted the stems of the flowers into it. Which meant that I could no longer drink water

after that. But that would not be a problem, because I had never drunk water out of it since I came here.

After I was done with dealing with the flowers, I approached the back of Sasakura, who was struggling against the stopper by the window.

“If it is too much, that’s okay.” I told him.

But, he did not respond. I heard only his breath. I was not sure what was going on.

I was hesitant to speak to him, so I took one of the books and got back to the bed. While leaning against the wall again, I opened the collection of poems. To recall where I had been reading, I flipped through the pages.

“All right.” Sasakura said.

But I did not see any change. After another two minutes had passed, he turned back to me without words this time. He showed me the metal fitting of the window stopper.

“Oh, you did it?”

“I did. But, another part is still there.”

“What? Is there another one?”

“This one for that window frame there.”

“That’s okay. Just one of the windows is enough. I won’t open the other one.”

“I cannot accept that. If I were to do something, I might as well do it thoroughly, all the way.”

“Why?”

“That is, you know, so-called ‘Sasakura style’.”

“It doesn’t have to be the Sasakura style ... Thank you. You have done a good job already.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No ..., there isn’t.” I sniggered a bit. “I don’t have so many things to be removed here.”

“I can remove the door, if you want.” Sasakura laughed, too.

Nurses would be surprised. That might be funny.

But, the laughter soon ended. Then, silence prevailed for a few seconds.

I was thinking what I could talk about with him. However, if I asked him how his engine experiments were going, it would make the mood awkward. He would definitely start telling a long story. Sasakura too was considering what to talk to me about. He was sitting on the chair with his legs open. While grabbing his both knees with both hands, he was staring fixedly at the floor. He did not seem to be raising his head anytime soon. It looked as if he were a human cannonball in a cannon to be launched.

“Is there something unusual in the airbase?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Sasakura lifted his head and shook it only once. “Nobody has flown in the last two days.”

“I wanna go back soon.”

“It seems that you can.”

“No ...” I shook my head. “It seems I cannot for a while.”

“How come?”

“I have no idea.” I ducked my head. *It is no use explaining to him that it is a part of the strategy.*

“Oh, by the way.” Sasakura put his hand into a chest pocket. He took out a sheet of paper. “Here you go.”

What I stretched my hand for and received was a photograph. That reminded me. I had asked him to bring a photograph of Sanka. The photo showed Sanka being moored in a hangar. I wondered when he took it.

“Thank you.” I saw Sasakura’s face. “Yesterday, I had a dream in which I piloted a Sanka. It was a new model.”

“Really, what are the differences that you have noticed?”

“The airframe was not made of metal. It was very light.”

“Oh.” He nodded, while looking convinced. “You pilots have this habit of

thinking in terms of nothing but that.”

“I remember how wonderful the feeling was.”

“If we can remove all the weapons, then it will become an unbelievably light aircraft. I guess that it will be much lighter than an aircraft whose airframe is entirely made of plastic.”

“Yeah, but that leads to the new question of what we fly the aircrafts for.”

“You’re right.” Sasakura curved his lips. “Same as human beings, about the matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you can enjoy leisurely times without working your butts off, then anyone can lead a simple, good life.”

I did not understand exactly what Sasakura meant. The very question of whether a person’s work was equivalent to its body weight inhibited my ability to comprehend.

I felt like smoking, so we went up to the rooftop together. I borrowed an ashtray from a nurse on the way. I opened the door to the rooftop, where no one was. Sasakura looked interestedly around the net that surrounded the rooftop.

I looked up at the sky. The weather was fine again. But, there was no sign of aircraft.

The two of us smoked alone.

Sasakura did not talk about engines. Since I expected him to do, I was a bit discouraged. When he finished the first cigarette, he started leaving. I parted from him, while telling him that I would be staying there a little more while.

I did so, because I somehow had a feeling that the boy would be coming here again. After Sasakura vanished into the penthouse, I was looking at the door for a while. But nothing happened. Hunch was not something that I could rely on.

I placed another cigarette between my lips, and lit it.

I saw an aircraft, which looked small, flying in the sky. It was turning. I noticed that it was a gliding bird. The smoke stung my eyes, and I rubbed them.

Why am I smoking leisurely in such a place? Of course, even though I am playing around like this, it is not going to force somebody else to have hard times making the ends meet.

In the end, that's all there is to it.

I'm not making any contribution to anyone at all.

I know that quite well.

That bird isn't contributing to anyone, either. Flying in the sky is no more important than that, in the first place.

Freedom is not useful.

Just like this smoke.

If anything, it might be unnecessary.

It is disliked.

Still, I wish I could be as free as smoke. To do so, in short, I would have to vanish like smoke. We could not stay in this world forever while being free.

At the last moment it is vanishing, it can become free.

So do fallen leaves.

I stubbed out cigarette on the ashtray.

“Okay, Kusanagi, let's get back to your room.” I murmured to myself in my mouth.

You should read books quietly on the bed.

A nurse would bring lunch to you.

You should smile to make her happy.

That is adulthood.

That is the refined behavior of the humankind.

And then.

Post the photograph of the aircraft on the wall, and pretend to endure the moment by believing that it is the proof of freedom.

Nothing hard at all.

Easier than dying.

You will realize that living is easier.

Probably, you will ... as well ...

Episode 2: Stall Turn At the very moment, Ivan Ilyich fell through and saw a light. It was revealed to him that his life had been wrong, and that it could still be put right. He was wondering what “the right thing” was. He kept silent to listen carefully. At the time, he could sense someone kissing his hand. He opened his eyes wide and looked at his child. He started feeling pity for the child. His wife was coming over. He looked up at his wife. She kept her mouth open, did not even try to wipe her tears on her nose and cheeks. She was gazing at him in despair.

This excerpt is from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* originally written in Russian by Leo Tolstoy.

-1-

I did not see the boy again for a week. Rather, I did not see anyone except nurses, doctors, and staff who brought meals to my patient’s room. Nor did I get a call from anyone. I vaguely thought everyone must have forgotten about me. More than that, I myself might have forgotten my own existence.

I moved to the rooftop at least five times a day. While smoking, I looked up at the sky. It was my current job for the time being. However, such a wonderful, peaceful period did not last long.

When I was at the rooftop, the door of the penthouse opened, and two men appeared. One was a middle-aged man with his hair close-cropped at the backside of the head, wearing a pair of glasses. The other, slightly younger one was holding a camera with a large lens. He was wearing a black beard.

“Excuse us, umm ...” The man with glasses approached and spoke to me. “Are you Ms. Kusanagi?”

I exhaled the smoke and dropped the ash onto the ashtray, which I was holding in the other hand. After the movement, I looked at him.

“Who are you, sir?”

“I am, umm ..., from YA Newspaper Company. Err, you know, I have something I definitely want to ask you about ...”

The other man turned the lens toward me and clicked the shutter, but I hid my face by raising my hand at the moment. Compared to an aerial combat, it was an easier reaction.

“You may have the right to ask me. However, is it the right thing for you to take my picture without my permission?” I spoke calmly.

“Oh, sorry. I mean, I apologize. Well, you know, it was not what we meant ... I am a fan of Ms. Kusanagi. Oh, to put it this way, for fans of Ms. Kusanagi throughout this nation, I would like you to speak your statement. Any comment will be welcomed.”

“My comment? About what?”

“Is it okay for me to take photographs of you?” The younger one asked bluntly.

“Hold on a minute.” The man with glasses kept his companion in check sharply.

“If possible, can you first talk officially with the public relations of our company?”

“Oh, that will not do fine. Such an artificially staged thing can convince no one. We would like to have the real voices from Ms. Kusanagi, definitely. If not, that would not be enough. Besides, in order to convince the fans that those are actually your real voices, we definitely need your photographs.”

“Isn’t the photograph you just took a moment earlier good enough? I think that it captured my mood of not wanting to have the photographs taken.”

“Umm, are you okay with your wound? It’s your neck, right? How soon do you think you will be able to make a comeback to the battlefield?”

“I have no idea ...”

The door of the penthouse was opened with a slam, and Kai was standing there. The two men looked back toward the direction.

After adjusting the glasses with her finger, Kai was approaching me with the stride of a fashion model with a good posture.

“I’m sorry, but we will be holding a press conference later at 03:00 p.m. in a conference room below.” Kai spoke in a soft tone, while adding an artificial smile in the end.

“Oh, but, we would like to get something before that ...” The man with glasses looked at me reproachfully.

“Just make sure not to write her real name. I would like you to follow the rules.” Kai warned.

Come to think of it, reporters had already been aware of my real name. I wondered if my name was widely known already. I had never thought of how I was being recognized to the general public. It was because it did not matter to me how I was being regarded. Once I reached the sky, nothing did matter anymore.

The two men were coerced by Kai’s quiet, but menacing look. In the end, the man with glasses handed just his business card to her, and they left. After the door of the penthouse was shut with a thud, Kai lit a cigarette, glanced at me sideways, and smiled. This time, her smile was not a fake one. She was looking really delighted.

“Ma’am, what is the press conference?” I asked.

“Oh, that. All you have to do is to attend it. You need not speak a word. All comments will be told by our reporters from the public relations. But, you know, you should wear the uniform and keep everything neat and clean, because they will likely to have to take your photographs.”

“My uniform is bloodstained. It is not looking neat and clean.”

“We’re not talking about the uniform.”

“What?”

“I mean, you yourself.”

I leaned my head sideways.

“Have you never made up?”

“Sorry?”

“Alright.” Kai moved her eyes toward other random directions, sighed, and looked at her wristwatch. “I will somehow handle it. And I will provide you with a new set of uniform, of course. With a military decoration.”

“Decoration?”

“Umm, you will understand once you see it. A small one. You should accept it, while regarding it as an accessory. Just endure it by wearing it. Right, you have nothing to worry about.”

“I do not worry about anything in particular. But ...” I closed my eyes once to put my thoughts in order. “It is difficult for me to regard it as a favorable situation, if I myself do not understand what is going on.”

“I do not think I can understand what is going on around me either. That is the case for anyone. Don’t you think so?”

She dodged the main point that I was trying to make, but her gentle expression relieved me. It was the reason why I nodded and relaxed my lips. I switched my mindset.

“I won’t complain as long as I am allowed to pilot an aircraft.” I was surprised by the remark that was uttered from my own mouth. I guess my true mind bypassed my brain, and made me speak so. I was impressed by how slick and shrewd my true mind was.

“Right, I have come here to talk to you about it,” Kai paused once to smoke. While exhaling a thin streak of smoke, Kai instantly formed the shape of her mouth to show her good mood. “We will ask you to fly in the very near future.”

“When would that be?”

“Maybe, in three or four days.”

“Will I be allowed to get back to the base?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. We are assigning you to another duty.”

I gazed into her face.

“Don’t worry.” Kai squinted. *Teachers at an elementary school often showed a face like this*, I was reminded.

-2-

While Kai was giving me a makeover, I closed my eyes during most of the time because I could not bear to look at my own face in the mirror. At first, I was in white clouds. Then, they were getting gradually thinner, and in the end the view was brighter in an instant. The shining air above the clouds. I discovered the fact that I could ascend to that altitude without any resistance. I opened my eyes once and then closed them again to see the rapid climb. I looked at it repeatedly. One of the reasons why I repeated the routine was that its amazing wonderfulness made me open my eyes before realizing it. But, when I saw my face in front of me, I closed my eyes again in haste. Although I should have kept my eyes shut, I forgot to do so very easily. It was funny. I succeeded in getting into a good mood. It might have been my calmest moment since I came to the hospital.

“You look happy.” Kai said. “That’s good. So ... You are more charming when you are smiling like that.”

“Am I smiling?” I asked. I opened my eyes to make sure of how I was looking in the mirror. However, all I saw was the same old grimace.

“Well, I mean, relatively speaking, that is.” Kai chuckled. *What is so funny about it for her?*

She put me in a green uniform and had prepared a new pair of boots for me. She attached a brooch called a military decoration to my chest. She had me put on a military cap and stand in front of the mirror again. *What a weird costume. Are you going to march or what, Suito Kusanagi? If I get on an aircraft with this costume, I would feel cramped.* When I was going down the stairs, my tibialis muscles were ready to suffer from cramps.

The conference room was filled with a lot of people, and some were overflowing into the corridor. Kai advanced into the crowd. I walked right behind her. Because the camera flashes were dazzling, I looked downward. I regretted that I was not

putting on a pair of sunglasses.

Two tables were lined up beside a wall. Two uniformed men were already sitting at the tables. Kai made a salute toward them, so I followed suit. I had seen the face of one of them. *That's right. He was the man who came to the aircraft carrier at the time of the military drill.* The other man was a figure unknown to me. Obviously, they were at higher ranks than I was.

When we sat at the chairs beside the tables, Kai whispered in my ear.

“No worries. All you have to do is to just keep quiet. Do you have anything you want to say?”

“No, ma'am.”

I could not close my eyes here. Everyone was sitting while facing us. There was no chair on the backmost row, where attendees were standing. Those who were holding the cameras planted themselves by the both walls. 70 percent of them were males. Men were generally in black. Females were wearing suits in brown or gray. *Is it the latest trend of fashion?* No one was wearing an aloha shirt or a jumpsuit. No one's face was smudged with oil. I could not even find a person who was smoking. Considering the fact that this was taking place in a hospital building, it might have been the way it should be.

The sounds of flashes and shutters dominated the room for a while. I began to worry if they would continue to do so until the batteries would go out.

The man next to Kai started speaking. At first, the statements of appreciation, gratitude, and something like that. Then, he introduced me to the crowd. He said I was “the top ace pilot of our company”.

“As you probably know, the first lieutenant is now receiving the treatment in this hospital due to the wound she was inflicted in the last dogfight. We do not try to deny the information you got from some other sources. This time we have brought her here because we feel uneasy about the possibility that her honors might be marred by conjectures and false rumors. For example, we have heard of the rumor that the first lieutenant appearing in posters or anything of the sort does not actually fly an aircraft. Look ...” The man extended his hand toward me and glanced at me. “If you see this first lieutenant, I believe you will understand the truth of the matter.”

I was careful not to change my facial expression and to move while maintaining the upright posture. It required more physical strength than I had thought. I remembered I was ordered to participate in a training like this at school when I was a child. I endured it back then, while telling myself it was the preparation for the case in which I was threatened with a pistol by a robber. I could relax in this current condition more than in the robbery situation. It meant that I had grown up to such an extent.

The other man took over the explanation and showed some of the data about the recent achievement of our company. He reported the number of the aircrafts I had shot down, categorizing them by the models and by the time frame. The numbers were correct. It meant that they corresponded with what I was recognizing as the right statistics. I smiled a little, because the numbers matched with each other. But, at that moment, a flood of camera flashes blinded me. They seemed to be wanting to take pictures of my smiling. Because of that, I got back to the original sulky self.

In the end, they were talking about the latest dogfight. The top ace pilot of the enemy was called the River. *Is it his official codename, not Joker? Or, is it the nickname our side has given him?* I was not sure.

I did not believe that a pilot at that level was the top-class. For example, I knew the one whose aircraft was marked with a black cat. While hearing the explanation, I was thinking about him. I had encountered him only once. Moreover, we could not fight at the opportunity. When we would meet him next time, I would fight against him at the risk of my life. Just by thinking about it, I was thrilled.

After the explanation was over, I was slotted into the interview session.

“Excuse me, is the lady sitting there the real First Lieutenant Kusanagi?” It was the first question. People let out the noise, and everyone was smiling. Although I myself felt it was funny as well, I kept silent.

As he was asking the question, there was no proof that I was the real First Lieutenant Kusanagi. To prove it, we needed a Sanka and a runway here.

“Let me mention just in case. Please do not report her real name in public.” Kai replied in a businesslike manner.

“I apologize, ma’am. I appreciate your parrying my trifling joke.” The same reporter bowed and continued. “She is so graceful, so, you know, it is difficult for

me to believe that she was leaving the impression of being able to pilot a fighter aircraft ... Well, ma'am, how is her wound?"

"Not serious." Kai answered immediately. *Oh, is this a system in which she answers the questions instead of me?* I felt relieved. I secretly sighed long and slowly.

"Has she ever inflicted wounds during aerial combat in the past?"

"Never." Kai replied. *She's correct.*

"Do you mean the enemy in the latest combat was formidable by that much?"

"In dogfights, some unavoidable circumstances may happen at any time." Kai spoke indifferently. "As for the latest one, First Lieutenant Kusanagi lost her consort plane. As explained earlier, the number of the enemies was five."

"May I ask if the enemy was still formidable?" The reporter who asked the question was staring straight at me.

Kai, sitting next to me, looked at my face. I nodded slightly.

"So says she." Kai explained. Everyone smiled again. "Any question?"

A female reporter, who was raising a hand, was called on, and stood up with a microphone.

"At first, I appreciate this opportunity to get to see you, ma'am. I have two things to ask. When is the happiest moment for her? And, when is the saddest? Those are my questions."

Kai looked at me. I brought my face closer to her ear and whispered.

"When I'm flying, and when I cannot fly."

While listening to my answer, Kai chuckled.

"She just gave me very clear answers. The happiest moment is when she is flying an aircraft. The saddest is when she cannot do that. Next question, please."

I can speak the answer directly by myself. I thought so to some extent for a moment. Probably, they were afraid that I might end up saying what I should not say.

Another man was called on.

"Why do you choose to aviate a fighter aircraft?" He questioned.

Because I have no other choice than flying a fighter aircraft, I thought. This time, Kai did not look at my face.

“Even if it happens not to be a fighter aircraft, then I think she is still happy ...” Kai answered. “This is according to what I heard from First Lieutenant Kusanagi previously. If she gets on other types of airplanes, she cannot fly as freely as she would be able to do with a fighter aircraft.”

I wonder if I told such a thing to her before, I thought. Nonetheless, I still felt that way so surely. I had no objection to her reply at all.

After that, some reporters asked about my days in the airbase, working conditions in our company, and my intended stint of the current job. Kai answered properly instead of me. I myself could not come up with an answer for each question.

“It is past the scheduled time, so the next question is the last.”

The man who raised his hand was the one I met at the rooftop.

“Ma’am, we are sorry to have bothered you earlier today.” He bowed to me. “If possible, I would like her to answer to the final question for herself. Is it okay?”

“We did not make such a promise, sir.” Kai answered.

“We know it very well. But, I am a fan of First Lieutenant Kusanagi. It is the same for people waiting for my article. If I ask her about what she wants to do most now, she would probably answer that it is to ride on an aircraft. So, my questions are quite simple. What does she have to do beforehand? What does she want to do in advance?”

Kai brought her face close to mine.

“I will answer.” I declared to her.

“What is it?”

“Training.”

After looking at my eyes for about two seconds, Kai nodded. *In short, I just got permission. I will take it positively, by thinking that she actually trusts me to a certain extent.*

Another microphone was placed in front of me.

“In a hospital, the most important issue for me is to receive the treatment. So, I

am currently out of shape physically.” I could speak in a calm tone. “In order to get on the aircraft again, I think I need to be involved with the physical training first.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” The reporter, who had just asked me the question, said to me. “Specifically, what kind of training do you do?”

“Mainly, running.” I answered. “I have to lighten my body, so as not to be a burden for the aircraft.”

The reporter smiled and sat down on his chair after bowing.

The press conference was over. Our two male higher officials got out of the room first, followed by Kai and me together. All-out attacks of flashes and shutters again. I was led by Kai to another room one floor above. It was a reception room, whose curtains were swinging in the wind. It was a room as if cool air was gathered here. The two higher-level officials sat on armchairs opposite us. Kai sat on a sofa closer to me. I was still standing.

“Thank you two.” One of the superiors from the information bureau said. He is the younger one. “Very good work.”

“Thank you, sir.” I replied.

“Have a seat.” Kai said to me.

I sat next to her on the sofa.

There was a knock on the door, and a young woman entered while pushing a wagon. I wondered what was going on. She was coming in just for serving tea. She placed cups on the table and poured teas into them from the pot. *Why did she not pour tea into the cups before entering the room? When was the last time I drank tea?* I was gazing at the surface of the red liquid.

“Allow me to excuse myself.” She bowed and left the room. It did not seem that she was a hospital staff. *Has she come here all the way only to do such a trifle duty?*

“We are expecting a lot out of you.” The man from the information bureau said to me. “Until now, you have lived up to our expectations. We have once met before, haven’t we?”

“Yes, sir. I remember, of course.” I nodded.

“Back then, you were one of our prospects. But now, you are the only one

remaining. The candidates have been narrowed down, I mean.”

I nodded without words. I did not understand well what he was trying to say.

“Of course, the important part starts from now. Up until now, all you have been required to do is to grab a control stick to shoot down enemies. However, from now on, I would like you to take care of other things in the future. You need to do so.”

“Sir, may I ask you a question?” I asked. After making sure that he was nodding, I continued. “What will I have to do, specifically?”

“We understand you are craving to fly more than anything. However, from our point of view, you are the most talented prospect. According to our evaluation, we are talking about once-in-a-generation rarity. So, if possible, we would like to avoid assigning you to a dangerous duty.”

“Dangerous duty?” I cocked my head.

The man nodded.

Silence.

I tried to imagine duties that were dangerous and not so much.

If I could imagine such things, then it would be easy for me to compare them.

The other man was completely expressionless. He was drinking the tea in a leisurely manner. He did not seem to be interested in joining the conversation.

I looked at Kai, sitting next to me. She smiled faintly, and nodded at me. It was like the demeanor of a mother. Although I did not have such a gentle mother, it was exactly the kind of ambience that I imagined would be generated by a typical good mother. It was as if her face was saying, “That’s okay. So, don’t worry.” Surely, she was the only person whom I could depend on at this point. However, it comes with a catch “except for matters pertaining to aircrafts.” As for aircrafts, there could not be anyone whom I could rely on other than Sasakura. But, this and that were all the matters on the ground. Once I got up to the sky, I could depend on nothing. In the first place, I would not have time to do so.

“Sir, I wonder if flying in the sky is more dangerous than being on the ground, from my point of view.” I asked him a fundamental question.

“Yes, it is more dangerous.” He answered. He was letting the palms of his both hands touch each other in front of his face, putting the thumbs on his chin, and then applying the index fingers on the part of his face between his eyebrows. His eyes, located at the left and right sides of his hands that were put together, were gazing at me coldly.

“For me, being on the ground is more dangerous, sir.”

“Why do you think so?”

“My mind is unstable on the ground. I have always been unstable, until I got a chance fly an aircraft. But now, I am saved by flying into the sky. So, please, sir. I want nothing. I will accept any commands from you. So, please ... Sir, please do not take the fighting duty away from me.”

“You mean, reconnaissance missions would not satisfy you?”

“No, sir.” I nodded.

“Alright.” He nodded and picked up his tea cup. I was waiting for the words from his mouth. He sipped the tea and glanced at Kai for a moment. Then, he got the cup back onto the table. “Now I understand. Let’s see again in the very near future.”

He stood up. The other man followed him a bit later. I and Kai stood up as well, and saw the two higher-ranked officers off the room.

The door was closed. Footsteps were fading.

While sitting on the sofa, Kai sighed.

“Did I do anything wrong?” I asked in a low voice while standing.

She took a cigarette from a purse, held it in her mouth, lit it, and looked up at me.

“Why don’t you have it?” She pointed at the table with the cigarette. She seemed to be indicating the tea. Then, she crossed her legs. It was her usual pose.

I sat down and reached for the tea cup. I sipped the tea. It was a little bitter. It might have been real black tea. *If I remember correctly, Sasakura once said everything legitimate and real tasted bitter.*

On the following day, I got out of the hospital and moved to another location.

At first, I went back to the base. However, the only person whom I could meet was Goda, because I was ordered to prepare to move immediately. I left the books I had read in the hospital. I put some clothes in my bag. That's all.

I walked with Kai on a side path leading to the runway. My Sanka was already pulled out from a hangar and its fuel tank was filled up completely. I was looking for Sasakura, but he was not around the vicinity. The other aircraft was a green Senryu and the pilot was waiting in the cockpit. It seemed to have just arrived at the airbase just for the refueling. Kai climbed aboard the Senryu, the front seat of tandem. It was the first time for me to see her get on an aircraft.

I got into the cockpit of Sanka for the first time in quite a while. I checked the control stick and the throttle lever by grabbing them. I stamped on the right and left rudder pedals. The delighted feeling made my whole body warm. It was as if half of my blood, which had not been running recently, started flowing finally. *In short, have I been half-dead?*

I was told that we would be flying toward north for about an hour. All I had to do was to fly by following the Senryu. The weather was fine. The sky was bright. When I looked up, I touched the bandage on my neck softly. The wound was not bothering me at all. I could just think that I was wearing a scarf.

After we taxied toward the runway, the Senryu took off first. Then, I got the green light at once. While pushing the throttle lever up with my left hand, I gradually applied the rudders to counter the anticipated torque. The engine was picking up the pace comfortably and the air-cutting noise of the propeller blades was raising the pitch behind me. The carburetor was starting to sound like a flute. While being pushed against the seat with the acceleration, I was reminded that it was the very feeling I really loved. By pulling the control stick gently, I had the nose of the aircraft pitch upward. Then, I was ascending the imaginary highway in front of me.

As I got off the ground, the harsh grating noise of tires and rugged vibration both vanished, and the fuselage was entering the silence smoothly.

Sky blue.

What a beautiful color.

Harmony.

What a comfortable sound.

I let the fuselage lean right and left, to see the terrestrial surface. I was getting away from the dirty ground. The farther away I got from the surface, the more naturally I could accept the scenery. The patterns of villages, fields, and forests looked like a patchwork. However, the most beautiful thing on the ground was the sky reflected on the surfaces of ponds and rivers. It was the merciful sky blue fallen to the surface.

I caught up with the Senryu once and looked into the cockpit. Kai wearing a helmet was smiling while looking at me. *Does she know I can see her smile?* Although she must have had the data about my eyesight, my actual eyesight was far superior to what the data might indicate.

It was because, I always said, “I cannot see anymore,” in the middle of eyesight examination. I did not want to push myself to the limit by doing risky things such as to tell others about all of my abilities. I learned it at school. On the other hand, all other children desperately tried to make their abilities look as good as possible. They always overreached themselves and wanted to make an appeal about how great they were. I guess they just needed to score high grades on the teacher’s recommendation list. It was the proof of their believing that everyone around them was on their side. Luckily, I was not so naive like that. I did things half-heartedly on purpose to make others believe I was incompetent. If I had not done so, then I would have been in trouble when something occurred. *Am I wrong?*

Maybe, I might have had such a competitive character from the beginning. It was by nature. It might be the reason why I considered all the people around me as my enemies. Right, including my own mother. It could not be helped. That was my attribute.

I need not a friend.

Even when I am alone, I can fight.

I do not want a friend.

Those who wanted a friend were always concerned about the reactions from people around them, while observing how others felt. They desperately tried to conform with others by laughing together, by getting angry hastily, or by forcing themselves to cry. I saw many examples like that in a place called school.

It was a terrible place.

Compared to that.

Not even one of such people exists here.

Only those who can fight alone are ascending to the sky.

The acceleration that my body felt was getting heavier and lighter alternately, as if it was trying to shake my organs. *I feel fine.* I made a roll toward the right. A full roll. Then, making two full rolls toward the left. While I was rolling, I enjoyed looking up at the repeated exchanges of the view between the sky and the ground. The sun was revolving around me. So was everything. After they were revolving, I stopped them in a moment. My right hand properly remembered the feeling of the operation of the control surfaces for stopping the roll maneuver.

“Boomerang, what are you doing?” I heard the voice through the radio. Not Kai’s. It was the pilot’s. I guess it’s Kai’s message.

“It was the test for ailerons.” I answered.

Honestly, it was the test of my arm’s feeling when I controlled the ailerons. My nerves from the head to the fingertips were much more uncertain than the control linkage of aircraft mechanism. So, I thought it was the most important point to be tested, up in the sky. Even mechanics would not check it.

I felt funny and laughed. I chuckled aloud for the first time in a long while. In the middle, I checked the switch of the radio microphone. No problem. It had stayed turned off.

After flying for a while, we were getting closer to thick clouds. We hovered above them and advanced a little more. The Senryu was flying at a bit lower altitude in front of me. As much as I could see, no one else was flying. It seemed to be an area, in which aircrafts hardly flew. In the far distance to the west, I could see high mountains.

The rhythmical engine sounds sometimes made me feel as if my body was swinging. Of course, I was thinking about lots of things. About the previous flight. About the boy in the hospital. Then, about the press conference. And, about the account the supervisor told me after that. However, the propeller blades shredded all of them into pieces for me. Each time I thought about something, it was chopped up and blown away while dancing like confetti. They had just vanished instantly into thin air behind me. Then, there was still nothing ahead of me. Only the sky was there. I saw a path only for me. I just slid on the carpet neatly as if I was smoothing it.

The Senryu adjusted the direction. I followed suit. It was a bit easterly in direction. Then, we began lowering the altitude. I looked at the watch. I wondered if it was time to do something. There was more than half the fuel left in the tank.

We were descending into the clouds. The cushion was not as thick as I had expected. The climate under the clouds was not bad. The runway appeared soon. It was a familiar scene.

“Oh, this place.” I uttered.

It was the same airbase that I had visited by train in the past. I was ordered to conduct a test flight here. Back then, I was in a very bad condition, and I flew a bit recklessly. That was what I was recalling.

At the time, I was with the Teacher.

Teacher?

Who is it?

I chuckled again.

I don't care about who it is.

Yeah, it happened a long time ago.

The Senryu landed first. While turning by drawing a huge arc above it, I was watching it. I too was getting ready for the landing, as I was waiting for the permission.

No wind. The air was like sediment, precipitated at the bottom. I put the landing gears down just before the touchdown. After I heard the wind shriek, I entered the

runway. *Touchdown*. I managed to do it smoothly, without bouncing. While looking at a control tower on the side, I slowed down. There were several hangars, all of whose shutters were closed. Not a single aircraft could be found, except for ours.

I was taxiing and following the Senryu like a duck. People were waiting for us in front of a hangar. I saw two automobiles. As a worker was guiding me with flags, I stopped the aircraft. I turned off the ignition. Kai was already getting off the Senryu. I pushed up the canopy and inhaled the moist cold air outside.

After I stepped on a main wing, I pulled out a bag behind the seat. I carried it on my shoulder, and looked around again. I jumped off and landed on the ground. I took off the helmet. Kai was approaching me with steps like those of a giraffe.

“For today, have a meal and take enough rest.” She smiled.

“What will I do here? Could you not tell me about it yet?” I asked.

“Do you have anything you want to eat? If you like, why don’t we have a dinner together?”

“I do not have anything that I want to eat in particular. But, I’d like to accept the invitation to have a dinner with you, ma’am.”

“He will lead you to your room.” Kai indicated with her hand a young uniformed man, who was moving toward us. He stopped and made a salute. “I will pick you up in an hour.” Kai said to me.

“Roger.”

We walked to a place where two cars were parked. Kai opened the door of one of the two cars and got into it.

“First Lieutenant Kusanagi, this way.” The young man led the way and even opened the door of the other car for me to get into.

“I appreciate it.” I thanked him, threw the bag into the vehicle first, and got into it. Not even a taxi was this kind to me. I even felt a bit creepy about it.

The man got behind the wheel, and fired up the engine. The car started running immediately. While shaking its body bumpily, the vehicle ran down the path between the hangars. We stopped right in front of a white, three-story, and school-like structure next to the largest building. The man jumped out of the driver’s seat

right away, and opened the door for me again.

“Well, you don’t need to do that. I can open the door by myself.” Saying so, I got off the car. I wish I could make a proper smile in a situation like this. If I said such a thing, it might have sounded like a complaint.

“May I carry it for you, ma’am?” He asked. He seemed to be indicating my bag.

“That’s okay. It’s light.”

“This way.”

We went through the entrance, and climbed up the stairs right after that. The second floor, and then to the third. Deadly silence. No human figure at all. At the third door from the stairs on the third floor, he stopped. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. I received the key and entered the room first.

The window was right in front of the door. A bed was on the right. The bathroom was near the door. It was a far simpler set of accommodation than a hotel room. *Still, I prefer this.*

“Ma’am, is there anything you need?” The man, still standing by the door, asked.

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “Thank you.”

“Despite only for a couple of days, I’m honored to be at your service, ma’am.”

“A couple of days?” I cocked my head. “What is going on here?”

“Training sessions are scheduled to be held.”

“Oh ..., I’ve heard nothing about them, really.”

“I think you, First Lieutenant Kusanagi, will be the instructor.”

“What’s your name?”

“Ma’am, I am Higasawa.” He made a salute.

“Higasawa?” I squinted.

I was staring at his face. A round face. His eyes were also round. The face looked as if it was a part of a puppet in a marionette theater.

“I’m the younger brother of Mui Higasawa.” He replied. His face flushed a bit. If anything, he was about to show a happy face.

“You are ...” I nodded. Then, I took my eyes off him. “Are you ordered by someone to tell me that I will be the instructor for the training session?”

“No, ma’am.”

“So, let me just say that I did not hear anything. Do not say anything that you do not have to, okay?”

“No, I won’t, ma’am. I apologize.”

“Thank you. I will let you go now.” I said, without looking at him.

“I will excuse myself.”

The sound of door being closed. I walked to the door and locked it with a chain.

Then, I went back to the bed and sat on it. I took off my shoes. I looked at the wristwatch. *Should I take a shower first ...?* I stood up at once, and took off my jacket.

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While taking a shower, I was reminded a bit of Mui Higasawa. But it happened just in a moment. The memory was running down on my surface with water. *Among the things on the ground, the most beautiful one is water. Water falls from the sky. It washes away all the dirty things.*

By the time Kai picked me up, my hair was completely dry. I had not recently had my hair cut, so my current hair was getting a bit too long. The parts of hair on the sides were reaching my ears, and the strands of the front hair were touching my eyebrows. I found it to be annoying. What was so mysterious was that we actually had certain parts of our bodies that we had to cut and clip, such as hairs and nails.

I was guessing that we would go out somewhere for the dinner. The restaurant was on the first floor of the same building. It was spacious. The interior was luxurious, and a large table was placed at the center. At that point, only two chairs were set. No less than 10 persons could be seated around the table, if they tried. Paper napkins and glasses were set on top of the table. When we took seats, an elderly man, who looked as if he was shutting his eyes, appeared, and asked what we would like to drink. Kai ordered a red wine. “Clear water, please.” I made my order.

“Sparkling, ma’am?” The elderly asked me.

“No, just regular water, please.”

The elderly disappeared into the back of the restaurant.

“What do you think you have been brought here for?” Kai asked, while looking as if she was suppressing her laughter.

“Test flight? No, I cannot even imagine.”

“Haven’t you asked the man ushering you to the room earlier?”

“I asked his name.”

“Right, he’s Higasawa.” Kai nodded. “I ordered him to tell First Lieutenant Kusanagi that her duty would be to lecture in training sessions. One more thing. I commanded him to answer ‘No’, when Kusanagi asked him if he was ordered by someone to tell you so.”

“You were putting me to the test, I suppose.” I said with an expressionless face.

“Correct.” Kai just nodded.

“Did I pass the trial?”

“You are honest, and smart. I cannot ask for anything more. Of course, you passed.”

The elderly appeared with a tray. He poured red liquid into Kai’s glass and poured transparent liquid into mine. I was watching the bubbles moving around busily.

After bringing each glass close to the other, we moved them to our respective lips. I took two sips of the water. The cold sensation running down my throat.

“Although it is just my imagination, may I talk about my thoughts?” I asked.

“Sure. Anything you like.”

“Higasawa reported to you what happened with me a bit earlier. He told you that he got reprimanded by me for telling me more than he should. Then, in order to protect him, you have just come up with that storyline. You are kind to your subordinates, ma’am.”

Kai took another sip of her wine, and then relaxed her lips. In the end, she shook her head horizontally.

“As a lecturer, what should I do specifically?” I asked her another question. “To whom will I speak?”

“The auditing students are all inexperienced pilots.”

“How many?”

“Seventeen.”

“Are we now in a situation that allow so many people to play around here?”

“Even if it is limited to certain locales and it is temporary, a cease-fire agreement has been concluded. It’s confidential.”

The elderly appeared while pushing a wagon, and put two plates for each of us. They seemed to be for hors d’oeuvres. Processed fish and those which had once been vegetables. I tried to take a bite. *Very sour*. I took another sip of water.

“Doesn’t it match your taste?” Kai asked.

“Yes, it’s so delicious. But, I cannot eat a lot.”

“We cannot find a gourmet among pilots.” She smiled. “As far as I know, there is no exception. Can you come up with any reason for that?”

“I think they just do not want to be loaded with extra weight.”

“I see.” She smiled with her lips curved obliquely. “What do you think about Higasawa?” As if it were one of the dishes, she pronounced the name.

I thought I blinked just once, but I did not take my eyes off her.

“I heard he was Higasawa’s younger brother. He looked capable.”

“Right, it is because he is not a Kildren.” Kai conveyed a piece of the fish dish into her mouth with a fork. Her eyes, looking downward, were directed back to me again. “He once worked for a construction company. But, after his elder sister died, he started applying for to be hired by our company.”

“The information bureau, I suppose.”

“Correct.”

“Why have you decided to hire him?”

“I am not the one who is responsible for hiring him. However, the reason is

simple. We recognized that he has got enough talent for being hired by us.”

“Ma’am, why did you make him meet me?”

“That is not my responsibility, either. I guess he himself must have requested the occasion in particular.”

“I wonder why. Why did he have such a request?”

“I have no idea ...” Kai was expressionless. “But I might not have failed to understand how he must have felt. He might want to meet the one who witnessed the final moment of his elder sister to hear about it as much as possible. It is a normal feeling. Don’t you think so?”

“After the mission, I properly reported to the company how she died. Haven’t the members of the bereaved family gotten my report?”

“It is difficult for us to tell them all.”

“Really.” I nodded. I looked at the dishes on the table. The dead fish was not moving. “So, if he asked me about it, to what extent should I tell him?”

“We have no rule pertaining to it. You just make your own decision about what you think you should do.”

“I understand, ma’am.”

“Do you have anything you want to talk about with him?”

“No, there is nothing in particular.” I shook my head.

I do not have what I want to talk about. Always. In any occasions. I guess I have so many things I do not want to talk about, to the level that it is buried beneath the pile.

Soup was brought to our table. Warm, white soup. Something seemed to have sunk at the bottom, but I only scooped up the clear layer at the top of the soup. *Complicated taste*, I thought. Since it was complicated, it had gotten murky to that extent.

“Do you know what is up with the Teacher?” Kai asked suddenly.

The Teacher was a codename. My body reacted to the name. However, I managed to keep the reaction from surfacing. I let my body stiffen with tension, and tried not to move any part of my body. After making sure that I was okay, I

took a breath. *Slowly. So as not to be noticed by Kai.*

“What part of the Teacher are you speaking of?”

“About what he has been doing recently.”

“No, I do not know anything about it. How has he been doing?”

“Although we have not yet gotten any confirmation about it, he is still piloting a fighter aircraft.”

“Where?”

“Well, I have no idea about it.”

“We know that the one like him can work at any place.”

“What did you learn from him?” She put the spoon on the table, and took a paper napkin.

I had already given up on eating soup. While accepting the question, I slowly moved my line of sight like a centipede, from the table to sideways, and from a wall to the ceiling, “I’m not sure.” I answered. “Still, I am certain that I learned something from him. If I had not met him, then I think I would have become a different being from what I am currently.”

“Don’t you think that he left the base because of your arrival?”

That statement from Kai was what I could not have expected. I found myself looking at her eyes, and gazing into them for a few seconds. But, I could quickly recover the calmness, and took my eyes off her.

“No, I don’t think so ...” I uttered ambiguously. I started having flashbacks of a few meanings, several values, and many scenes. They were coming with regular intervals like those from a machine gun.

“You can talk about a personal matter here. You know, just between you and me. I do not think you might be able to get the clues for solving the matters just by talking with me. However, I can at least listen to your story, no matter what you talk about.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” I replied. Probably, the response was too soon. I regretted doing so immediately. “But, it is okay. For the time being, I do not have any

problem that I cannot solve by myself.”

Kai looked back at the inner part of the restaurant. The gesture looked like she was requesting for the next dish. She took a cigarette from the purse, and lit it with a thin lighter.

“Would you like to smoke?”

“No, thank you, ma’am.”

“Occasionally, I really envy you, Kusanagi.” Kai said, while exhaling the smoke. The aroma was reaching me.

I was waiting for the rest of her words without saying anything. Kai too was staying silent for a while. *Is she trying to get her ideas in shape about what she wants to tell me? Or, is she focusing on smoking?*

I had never envied anyone. At the same time, I had never wanted to be envied by anyone. *In the first place, I cannot understand the feeling of envy, I should have said so, to put it that way. If I manage to observe that others are very happy, have splendid careers, or are illustrious, I would not let my thoughts be directed to the concept of comparing them with myself. The matter of comparison is downright meaningless. I mean, it is just like getting on different types of aircrafts. Once we get up to the sky, we cannot just switch to other aircrafts. Likewise, once someone is born to this world, he or she can never switch their lives.*

“I have never talked to anyone about such a thing ...” While holding the cigarette between her fingers, Kai started. “In your field, you can bring yourself to the higher ranks someday, if you have the talent. It is the world that is all about their talents, isn’t it? I envy that aspect.”

That is, she meant she belonged to the world in which matters were based not just on their talents.

“No matter how much great talent you may have, it is not easy for you to be recognized. Inevitably, it has to be affected by other factors.”

“For example, what kind of factors come into play, ma’am?” I asked.

“For example, well ... Although it might be old-school, you know, being a female is definitely a disadvantage for me.”

“Oh, is it? But in other cases, can it not be the advantage?”

“Well, yes. If you can ride on the wave of political trends and make use of the consideration for gender equality, you’re right ... In Kusanagi’s case, it actually is. However, it is not what I want to say. How should I put it? There are personal politics, and we have to experience what you don’t want to. Now that I have reached this age, I can talk about it while laughing it off. How many mortifying experience have I accumulated to date ...? I think I have come this far, only with the mindsets like ‘Remember that. I will show you what I have got, and you will see.’”

“Against whom, ma’am?” I asked.

“That’s a good question.” Kai smiled and nodded several times. “I wonder whom it is against. Probably, I would never want to lose against anyone, including all of those whom I disliked around me. They smile happily and pretend to get along with others in the workplace. They eat together. They go out for drinks together. But, in reality, they never trust each other. They are always waiting for the opportunity. They all dream of the moment at which they get the better positions than others by treating them like doormats, turning them into the steppingstones, making use of them, and kicking them down from the platforms to the lower positions. Those are what I would do, even if the one may happen to have a favorable feeling toward me.”

I cocked my head. It might have taken some time for me to understand that.

“Don’t you have such experiences? Such thoughts?” Kai smiled. “Hypothetically speaking. Even though two persons may love each other, it may turn out to be a different story when they are working. They may betray each other easily.”

I shook my head horizontally just once.

“Well, I should say that it is the dirty world of adults.” While pressing her cigarette onto the ashtray, Kai said. She exhaled the smoke through her nostril, and stiffened her smile.

The elderly was pushing a wagon with the main dish. I wondered whether this place was the dirty world of adults or not.

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In the morning of the following day, I was ordered to pilot an aircraft again.

My Sanka left the runway alone. A tiny camera was attached to the cockpit, and the footage was to be sent to the ground through the radio. Also, they loaded a transceiver whose frequency was tuned much higher than that of a typical aircraft communication radio, and I was flying while talking with people on the ground. The camera did not bother me, because it did not speak to me. But, communicating with someone during the flight was annoying to me. *For example, can anyone calculate while talking to others? I think that is what the issue is about.*

They said I could fly freely all I wanted, so, at first, I just ascended to the higher altitude. After that, I deflected the various flight control surfaces to this and that ways, as if I was training. Come to think of it, I had never experienced this since the early phases of training that I took when I was a novice pilot. Since I started my career on flying in missions, I had never trained in the sky, probably because the armed force did not want the pilots to waste too much fuel. Or, they might have the policy, according to which pilots' techniques could be polished by experiencing actual dogfights. It was indeed true that the polishing would take place, and each blade would be polished further. Swords which had not been polished would snap and fall. One pilot's sword would be polished, by breaking others' blades. *That's all there is to it.*

What was different from usual flights was that I was piloting as I looked straight in front of me, while sitting back on a seat comfortably. So, I ended up looking at the camera at times. I found myself imagining someone who was peeping at me through it. I pictured Kai's face and Higasawa's. I was careful not to laugh. I did not laugh about such a trifle thing, though.

The weather was so fine that I could see the view in the far distance.

Mountains stretched endlessly.

There is probably a mirror somewhere, reflecting the scenery on it.

The sea could not be seen, and it meant that this airspace was above inland.

The reason for the existence of the location was probably the home-field advantage, which dictated that enemies would not be able to come this deep to attack.

When I finished demonstrating a set of aerial acrobatics, I was ordered to land. As the final performance, I executed the low pass flyby above the runway near the

ground level. This low pass was more difficult than any other acrobatic maneuvers. Flying near the ground was the most formidable and dangerous situation for aircrafts.

I pulled off an Immelmann turn at a low altitude. Right after that, I touched down on the runway with the full-flap configuration and the air brakes.

I left my aircraft in front of the hangar, and got on an automobile, which Higasawa was driving to pick me up.

“I’m impressed by your marvelous acrobatic maneuvers, ma’am.” He was praising me, while driving the car.

“Anyone can do that.” I replied.

Exactly. There is none who cannot do that. If I am the only one flying in the sky, I can do anything as I like.

What can I teach? What on earth do they want to learn from me?

I recalled the Teacher again.

What was I taught by the Teacher?

I am sure I once wanted to learn something from the Teacher.

I was voracious back then.

I have never been as avid as that back in those days.

What on earth did I want to study from him?

I do not know what exactly it was.

Anyway.

I wanted to be mighty.

I wanted to fly beautifully.

What is being mighty all about?

What is flying beautifully all about?

I wanted to know it.

I wanted to see it.

Have I managed to know it?

Have I managed to see it?

The automobile stopped before the building.

I followed Higasawa and entered the structure, which was next to the building where I was staying. This one was five stories tall. On the top tier was a control tower.

We entered the elevator. Its dull acceleration was uncomfortable to me. Since it was after the flight, I must have gotten airsick more or less.

We walked along a corridor on the fourth floor, and approached the door of a room. It was already open. As we were getting closer to it, we were greeted with applause.

I walked into the claps.

The place was like a classroom at school.

Desks were lined up, and uniformed men and women were taking seats.

On one side of the room were the windows. I could see the runway through them.

There was a white board on the side I was at. A white screen was placed beside it. An image projector was installed on the ceiling. They might have been watching the footage projected with it.

Kai was standing in front of a podium. She was wearing a deep-black uniform.

“First Lieutenant Kusanagi, to this way.” With her hand holding out, Kai directed me to sit on a chair beside the podium.

When I reached the spot, all the people in the room stood up simultaneously and made a salute toward me. I made a salute, too. Then, I sat on the chair. I was at a loss as to which direction I would turn to. After that, they all sat down again.

Higasawa closed the door and sat on a chair at the back of the room. I could do nothing but look around at the attendees.

As I had heard in advance, the number of the attendees was seventeen. Including Higasawa, eighteen. Three of them appeared to be females.

While looking at them one by one, I fixed my eyes just for a moment because I recognized a familiar face. It was Kannami, a boy whom I met in the hospital. The bandage on his head had already been taken off. Probably because of that, my impression of him was slightly different. He looked more dauntless and more masculine than before.

Their common point was that they were all young. Their eyes were large and glaring at me as if they were shooting me with lines of sight. They were similar to the eyes of birds. *Pilots' eyes.*

None of them was putting anything on their desks. *In short, it is the kind of lecture, in which they need neither textbooks nor notebooks.*

Suddenly, I received a question.

“Ma’am, which of the flight control surfaces do you focus on most intensely?”

“I’m not sure. I do not have any sensation of focusing on something in particular. However, I would say that what troubles me most when I delay the control is the throttle control, I think.”

“Ma’am, for what point do you make a request to a mechanic?”

“Nothing in particular. I am blessed about the issue in that sense.”

“About the shift of the center of gravity due to the presences of external fuel tanks or mounting the weapons, do you use trim tabs each time for alignment?”

“I don’t care about that.”

“Ma’am, do you tend to use flaps often?”

“I have no idea, because I do not compare myself with anyone.”

“At the very moment of pulling the trigger, what do you see?”

“Next target.”

“Is there any aircraft model that is difficult for you to deal with?”

“I do not particularly feel any difference between the aircraft types. My theory is that whoever is aviating the aircraft is more important.”

“Ma’am, it appears that you were using rudders when you executed an Immelmann turn. Why did you do so?”

“If necessary, I use any control surfaces at any time. It is like we twist our bodies when we are confined in a narrow place.”

“Ma’am, I suppose you might consider Sanka the superior model. Is it correct?”

“I don’t know. But I think it suits my preference.”

“It seems to me that the kill marks painted on the fuselage of your aircraft are fewer than the actual number.” This question was from Higasawa. “Do you put the kill marks only of the targets that you think are convincing?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I just forget to put the kill marks.”

While answering questions, I occasionally looked at Kannami, who was sitting by a window. He did not raise his hand. He appeared to be looking at me, then actually he was not paying attention. It seemed that he was trying to avoid our gazes meeting each other.

After that, the question-and-answer session continued. Each one was very specific. In this respect, it differed a lot from the press conference at the hospital. I did not receive any abstract questions about my thoughts and feelings for vague matters. I guess that it was because all of them sincerely wanted to obtain something valuable for themselves.

About 20 minutes had passed, by the time they finally exhausted all the questions.

“Do you have anything else to say?” Kai came to the podium and asked me.

“They were all watching what was going on in my cockpit, correct?” I asked her.

“Yes.” Kai admitted.

“It can hardly serve as a reference. Usually, I don’t fly in such an elegant way at all. I look toward my right side, survey backward, glance upward, see the left side, look back, and search desperately for the target while pressing my face against the windshield. When I am pressed by the G-force, I lose the freedom of movement even further. Even so, I have to pay attention. Then, in the middle of the process, I think.” I paused once. *What do I think, then?* “I mean, the enemy is also looking desperately at you. It also has to be thinking desperately. That is the way I think about it. They are all the same. Another cockpit is in the sky, and the other side of the combative confrontation is handling its own aircraft desperately. Only one of us

can survive. One of us has to cease to fly. We are all so desperate. But ... In this occasion, I come to the conclusion that I might as well enjoy it. I relax and try to like the enemy. I will try to play with the enemy together. We will dance while holding each other's hands ... As if we are circling around a maypole, in the music. As if my movements are rising to the surface from the interior of my body. As if I feel like dancing. That is the way I feel. By holding the hands of the dance partner, I understand the other's feelings. That allows me to predict the motions. Right, that's the way it is. Sorry. I suspect that this information is not useful for you."

I fell silent.

I looked at my shoes once.

Then, I looked up, and then observed all of them directing their eyes toward me.

Including Higasawa and Kannami.

Everyone was paying attention to me.

"I hope you will fight commendably. Fight cleanly. For no one else. Just for yourself."

The moment I said so, the Teacher's face came up in my mind. The Teacher in my imagination was smoking in a dark room.

There was applause. I thought that I heard it from a very distant place. I felt so embarrassed that I took my eyes off, and looked at Kai by the podium. She was smiling while also clapping with others.

"Okay, let's take a twenty-minute break." Kai announced to all the attendees.

The pilots stood up and came to me. They wanted to shake hands with me. I could not deny, so I did. I do not remember how many hands I shook. About half of them, probably. Kannami did not come to me. The last one was Higasawa.

"Thank you so much." Higasawa said. His eyes were filled with tears. *What's going on with him?*

I left the room with Kai and walked along a corridor.

Not using an elevator, we were climbing down the stairs.

"Really, you always impress me." Kai whispered in a low voice.

“What impressed you?” I asked.

“It might be the talent you were born with, I think.”

I could not understand what she was talking about. I wondered if she was speaking of my ability not to feel nervous in front of the audience.

As for me, I was simply regretting that I spoke too much because I was getting a bit too hyper right after experiencing the flight. After speaking in front of many people, I always had a bad aftertaste.

-6-

I took a shower again after dinner. I wanted to read some books, while feeling refreshed. But I did not have anything to read beside me. There was not too much air in the room for me to smoke. I thought of taking a key and going out to look for the proper wind somewhere. At the stairs, I was thinking whether to go upward or downward. If I went upward, I would less likely to meet anyone. I climbed up the stairs, and managed to open the door leading to the rooftop. It was dark outside. The rooftop was surrounded by steel railings. I walked toward them, and found out with my hand that they were rusty.

I lit a cigarette, and overlooked the dark runway. Only the minimum amount of lights was blinking here and there. Only at the high place in the sky, away from the horizons, stars were twinkling. I could not tell the difference between the mountains and the sky.

I was thinking about Higasawa. I mean, Mui Higasawa, the one who once flew with me. She was a splendid pilot. I could clearly recall the scene in which her aircraft was going down. Her Sanka collided with the ground and bounced while spinning. The next scene was the whiteout of fire extinguisher. Then, it was Higasawa's body lying on a stretcher.

The smoke of my cigarette fused quietly with oxygen, and then was returned to the air. If I recalled it, nothing would happen. Nothing echoed in my mind anymore. *Still, why do I recall it at times? I wonder whose will is at play? At least, it cannot be a will of a dead person.*

Why has her younger brother come here? Is it viscosity of human's intentions? Even the air

twined around us with its viscosity. So did water. *Then, is it also the case for human minds as well?* What did Higasawa's younger brother want his sister to do? *What has he been chasing? What does he want to twine around?*

Probably, he believes he would get something by twining around something. Or, he might want to believe so. He wants to feel relieved by believing so.

Oh, what a viscous feeling it is!

Very tacky.

The ground is clammy and cloudy.

Everything here is sticky.

It is as if they are afraid of being taken apart from others.

They try to avoid being alone.

As a result, they ended up gathering things that are far lonelier.

It was a bustling loneliness like a graveyard consisting of many tombs.

However.

I do not think it is bad.

It might be a common thing. I think so as well.

Needless to say, I do not think it is pitiful or miserable.

Either will be fine.

I simply don't.

I don't want to stay in such a place.

I don't want to touch anything.

Right, I don't want to touch anything.

I don't want to be touched.

Probably.

Therefore.

I want to stay afloat.

All I need is air.

If there is none but air, I can accept it.

That is the only place where I want to be.

Until I die.

I wish I could be floating without a break.

But, that's not possible.

In addition, I feel that something is not right.

What I think during a night is always right at the time. As I say, there is no room for any doubts ... I would formulate the plans to do this and that, and then modify in certain ways, starting from the next day ... Consequently, while I get up, wash my face, drink coffee, talk to someone, and compare what I had been until the day before with what I will become, starting from the next day, I end up feeling what I might have thought in the previous night is just a childish dream.

But it can't be helped. If I do not do that, I would bother everyone. As a human, I have to keep my body alive. There was no way that I would destroy it. However, since I had never destroyed it completely, I could not even imagine how terrifying and irreparable it would be.

I had never been praised by anyone in my childhood. So, as I had been commended by others as of late, I felt weird. Needless to say, I did not feel glad about it at all. I think it was because I had not gotten accustomed to being praised. Moreover, if I try to find any values in the notion of being praised, I feel that it is equivalent to denying the very basis of my own being. I am the only one who can commend myself. I was not born to be praised.

Although I do not remember exactly when it happened, I was praised by my mother just once. It was when I was punched by a man who was visiting our house. I fell down on the floor. My cheek was hot. But, I still got up without saying anything, and stood in front of the man again. I wonder how old I was back then. Without crying or laughing, I just stood before him. The man railed something at me and got out of the room. Then, my mom started laughing. I did not look at her. I was determined not to do that for her. At the time, she said.

“That’s one heck of daring expression on your face.”

That was the only statement my mother had ever made to praise me. After that, I looked into the mirror in my room. I checked whether I had a daring expression. My cheek was swollen in red. A part beside my eye had turned a bit green. Not even a single teardrop was shed. If anything, I think I was feeling glad. That green internal bleeding was rare for me, and I even felt it was beautiful. So, it was a good memory. I cannot recall why I was punched, though.

I was finding myself touching my cheek.

It was not hot at that point. It was cold.

The cigarette was getting shorter. I was not savoring the taste too well. Even though I was not in bad shape physically, I still felt a bit of pain at the back of my neck, when I twisted my head to the left. Perhaps, my body was finally beginning to admit that it was its own wound. In this world, there are many things that would not generate the sense of pain unless a certain amount of time has passed. In short, human beings are basically not so sensitive. I mean, humans are not like meters or sensors.

I heard the door opening.

I looked back and saw a uniformed man appearing. He was coming toward me.

He stopped in front of me and made a salute. *It’s Kannami.*

“I knew you were here, ma’am.”

“Why have you come here?” I asked without changing my expression. “So, have you decided to volunteer for this? Are you okay with your medical treatment?”

“First Lieutenant Kusanagi, how is your injury?”

“Mine is not serious from the start.” I threw away my cigarette and trampled it out. “Then, have you recalled anything after that? Are you capable of carrying out your mission?”

“I have not recalled anything, but all my functionalities and abilities as a pilot have still been kept intact.” The boy said. It was a tone without intonation, as if he was talking about matters of someone else. “They decided that I could execute my missions without any problem.”

“Okay. Anyway, I’m glad that you seem to be doing fine.”

“I got the opportunity to observe your flight today. When watching it, my body was being pulled.”

“What do you mean?”

“I do not know ... Probably, I think it still remembers. I mean, each of my biological cells.”

“You mean that you have not yet piloted an aircraft, don’t you?”

“Not yet.”

“Isn’t that a sign that you are feeling frustrated?”

“Umm, First Lieutenant Kusanagi, may I talk with you about the dream I have while sleeping?”

“What?”

Kannami took one step toward me.

I looked upward at him. His face was right in front of me, and I saw the shape of his mouth. I wanted to observe what was coming out from it.

“What is ... the dream about?”

“I have it very often.”

Immediately, I recalled my own dream I had at the hospital. The dream in which Kannami appeared. We flew together and he was falling in the end. My pulse was getting more rapid. *Unusual*. I was experiencing that for the first time since I had met the Teacher. I held my breath to control myself.

“In the dream, I am running away while taking along one woman.” The boy looked up at the sky and started talking. “It is a dark place where we can not see the sky. Probably, it is deep under the ground and always in the humid air. Every place is flooded around my feet. She is a scientist and my precious one. In the dream, I mean. For me, and for the entire human race ... So, I have to save her. But, the pursuers are already getting closer. We have no ally. The antagonists are so formidable that we can never win if we fight against them. We have no choice but to hide from them and run away. However, we are getting cornered more and more.

Then, in the end, we can do nothing but give up. If we were to be caught by the pursuers, I would much rather kill her and myself. That is the way I start thinking. It would be easier than trying to run away. Additionally, I get the impression that it is what she wants as well. If we keep on running away forever, we would end up being exhausted. Obviously, I can not make such a proposition to her. Still, when I see her fatigued face, I am forced to realize that she is willing to die. So ...”

The boy gazed at me. I saw the light in his pupils.

I wondered what light they were reflecting.

Are they likely to be his tears?

Is it perhaps something more beautiful?

I don't know.

Although it is dark.

Why?

“So, at last, I end up killing her.” The boy’s voice was quivering slightly. “She falls down while smiling, and I hold her in my arms. Then, I shoot my own head with the gun. If I do not do so, she will end up leaving me to a distant elsewhere. I find myself being convinced that I have to take off, before I lose sight of her.”

The boy extended his hand.

I touch the fingers.

Slender fingers.

White fingers.

A dry hand, with no body heat.

Perhaps, more beautiful fingers.

Perhaps, more beautiful hand.

“At the moment ..., I wake up. I mean, I am brought back to this world after I die. Over and over again, I have the same dream.”

His pupils were glimmering again.

Perhaps.

However.

I must not touch him.

For some reason, I felt that way.

There are what can easily be broken just by being touched.

Perhaps, it might be broken even more ...

Perhaps, it might vanish even more ...

Perhaps ...

“How do you feel about that woman?” I asked in a calm tone. It was the voice from my head, not from my heart.

“I feel that she is precious.”

“Anything else?”

“What do you mean, ma’am?”

“Do you think that you want to make her yours?”

“I do not understand what you mean by wanting to make her mine.”

I grabbed his wrist and drew him toward me.

Silence.

Silence.

After we consumed the night for about 10 seconds, he tilted his head.

I drew him closer to me, stood on my tiptoe, and kissed him.

Break away.

Disengage.

I let go of his hand.

After being released, he looked downward.

His beautiful pupils are being hidden.

Something is vanishing.

Something is being cut off.

Something is shrinking.

Something is giving up.

I tried to pick up a cigarette from my pocket, but changed my mind. I had better look for proper words. However, there were no words in my pocket. I had my hands take a rest in the pockets, so as not to touch him anymore.

“What’s that?” Kannami asked in a low voice.

“I don’t know.” I answered. “Do not ask me.”

“I apologize, ma’am.”

“Oh, I am sorry.” I apologized. “I did not mean it ...”

This time, he hugged me and then drew me up to him with both hands. I had my hands kept in the pocket. His hands reached my back.

He brought his face to mine.

But, he was hesitant.

For a few seconds.

For a few seconds.

Slowly relaxing the strength.

He is nodding without words.

He might have tried to be bowing.

I focused on searching for something in his pupils.

I cannot see the beautiful twinkles anymore.

If his tears are dried up, that’s good for him.

Because this place is not in his dream.

Your precious is not here.

Recall that.

There is no such thing as precious.

Remember that.

“Excuse me, ma’am.” Kannami said, while making a step backward.

Air currents were running between us.

“You do not have to excuse yourself.” I answered.

He made a salute and turned around.

I was seeing his back.

That had nothing to do with the deep background of the night.

I looked at him moving away and disappearing beyond the door.

It's quiet.

The vibration still remained in my body, though.

Outside me was tranquil.

Then, the cigarette butt was around my feet.

Same as the cinders.

Smolder.

Episode 3: Snap Roll Then, he became quiet. He not only stopped crying but also stopped breathing, and became all attention. It was as if he were listening not to a voice speaking in sounds but to the voice of his soul, to the current of thoughts welling up within him.

“What do you need?” was the first clear concept capable of being expressed in words, that he heard. “What do you need? What do you want?” He repeated to himself.

This excerpt is from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* originally written in Russian by Leo Tolstoy.

The daily life at the inland airbase continued for about a week. The attendees changed from one member to next, day by day. I did not see Kannami on the second day and thereafter.

I could bring my Sanka to the sky frequently. Indeed, it was a suitable expression. I imagine folding a paper airplane, holding it in my hand, and tossing it with a gentle snap while looking up at the sky. The act of sending the paper airplane into the sky is probably similar to, for example, the deed of releasing a bird. Even though I was the one sitting in the cockpit, I felt that way. In other words, I was probably having the delusion of the Sanka flying freely in the sky. I was no more than a part of Sanka. This feeling, however, would vanish during dogfights. While I danced with the enemy, the existence of Sanka completely disappeared from the vicinity around me. I myself was dancing in the sky, and so was the opponent. I wonder if risking my life was equivalent to getting this sensation in the end. I knew those who fought against each other were not aircrafts themselves. Each human maxed himself or herself out to kill others. Under the condition that we could accept our deaths, we would ascend to the sky. The fierce nature of human beings just gave me a chill, just by thinking about it.

I came to understand well such differences in how we perceived who or what were actually flying, as I repeated the demonstration flights at this airbase. As for this, I was not the one who was flying. This was different from my own action of flight. I was merely letting an aircraft fly. It was the essential technique for allowing me to take off, but it was not the same as my own presence flying in the sky by myself. *Completely different.*

After all, is it impossible for me to experience the sensation of flying unless I engage in fight? As of now, I think it is the conclusion. However, obviously, I did not want to die, and I did not want to kill the opponents, if I could avoid it. *It's true.* There was so much for me to gain. In order to exchange for whatever I can get, it appeared that I was compromising with the mindset of "That is too bad" about anything. Unfortunately, I could not come up with better explanation. Even if I knew it, even if I understood it, I was getting the premonition that it might have not even been just another so-what issue.

Kai, whom I had not seen for about three days, got back to the airbase, and we were having dinner again.

“This has suddenly come up. I ask you to move to another location tomorrow.”
When dessert plates were being served, Kai gave me the order.

“Where to?”

“We should leave at 07:30 in the morning. Make sure to pack up your belongings by then. I will tell you what the destination is tomorrow.”

I was delighted a bit. I had been getting sick and tired of my life in this place. I had been just playing around, being able to fly alone every day. Yet, I felt so cramped that I could not call it a vacation. Although I was having fun only when getting into the cockpit, I felt depressed once again, each time I touched down on the ground and got off the aircraft. I ended up thinking why I had to do such a thing. Speaking of which, I had to also contemplate why I was living. I would not say that thinking this way itself was not a good tendency.

I went back to my room and packed up my stuff. I was done within a minute. Then, while I took a shower and opened a window to dry my hair, the door was knocked. I opened the door, and found Higasawa standing there.

He, wearing the uniform, made a salute.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Forgive me for bothering you at this late hour. I am just here to state my appreciation to you. I am leaving here tonight.”

“Really.” I nodded. “I too will leave tomorrow.”

“I am really honored to meet you, ma’am.”

“Do you want to come in?”

“No, thank you. I just hope that you will always do fine and prosper in the future.”

“Thank you.”

After that, several words tried to come out of his mouth. But, they failed to be formed into any sound. I waited. It was not really a topic for me to jump-start anyway.

“Umm. Well, then ...” He gave up, and bowed. “I’m leaving, ma’am.”

I nodded without words. Since he was looking downward, he could not see my nodding. He was walking away in the corridor. I closed the door.

I sat on the chair and lit a cigarette. I soon threw away the question about what he was trying to say. Also, as if I was looking away, I did not deal with the memory, in which his elder sister was going down. I dared to sneer at it intentionally, alone.

Suddenly, I noticed that he had loved his elder sister and he still wanted the substitute outside him for his elder sister, who had vanished. *Something like that is flickering in front of him*, I was guessing.

If I were him, I would shoot a machine gun immediately. *Such an eyesore. I want to always make my eyesight clear. It is the kind of clearness that I need in order to intercept an enemy by showing the highest respect, no matter when and where it is coming from.*

I also realized that I could not understand the feelings because I did not have siblings. As for a blood relative, the only person I came up in my mind was my mother.

For a moment, I held my breath.

And then, there is another one.

Where is the one now?

I wonder if the one is still alive.

Smoke, smoke.

I put out the cigarette.

I closed the window. My body was getting cold.

-2-

The weather was sunny again on the following day.

Like when I arrived at this airbase for the first time a while ago, I took off the runway, while following the Senryu with Kai in it. I heard it would be about a two-hour flight. They gave me the coordinate of the destination in advance. I had never been to the area, which was close to a city. They told me that the facility on which we were scheduled to land belonged to the private sector, and it was not one of our

bases. It was extremely rare for us to land on a civilian airfield. I imagined that we would be attending another event again. I was being used by the PR department of our company. Even so, I thought I should not make any complaints about it, because I was being treated well with privilege for playing that role.

In the latter half of the flight, we flew above white clouds. Kai occasionally spoke to me through the radio. I understood this was the area in which we could afford to do so. It was such a picnic-like flight. As we were approaching the destination, we saw a huge passenger airplane rising above the cloud. A mysterious airplane. It was as if a ship was flying. Four propellers were revolving in front of the wings and another four at the rear side of the wing. It was much bigger than a bomber. As for a bomber, it was designed for just dropping its luggage or payload. A passenger airplane would remain heavy even when during the landing phase, and I imagined that it would be tougher. But, I once heard the pilots of passenger airplanes were all former pilots of bombers without exception.

We were descending into the clouds.

The world below the clouds was gloomy and cloudy. Numerous buildings looked small at first. It was a kind of scenery which I had seen only in photographs. Although it was still in the daytime, some buildings were lit with the red lights turned on.

Before we got the permission for landing, I was letting the aircraft draw circles by turning constantly in a designated airspace. Right below me seemed to be a green tract of land or a graveyard. After two passenger airplanes took off, the permission was granted. The Senryu first entered the landing course, followed by me.

The runway was unbelievably long. Even for a bomber, one-third of this length would be enough. A side road for working vehicles beside the runway would have been enough for a fighter aircraft to land.

We decelerated right after the landing, went into the taxiway, and made a U-turn toward the direction opposite the control tower. We were now moving toward the edge of the runway. I did not think this airfield had hangars for fighter aircrafts. *We might leave here after just refueling*, I imagined.

I saw an expressway close by. Many automobiles were coming and going to all directions. Beyond the roads, medium-rise buildings were standing in rows. I

wondered if they were multifamily housings. These were not too tall, no more than 10 stories each. What I saw in the haze over the vicinity was probably the city center. I could not tell how tall those buildings in the distance were. Perhaps, because the weather was different only in the area, it was shining brightly while reflecting the sunlight. Once getting on the ground, it was occasionally difficult for me to grasp the distances and sizes.

I knew the name of the city, of course. But I thought it was the place I would hear the name of only through the news programs. I had never imagined myself coming to such a big city. I could only imagine that there were a lot of people. Needless to say, I disliked places with too many people.

We were approaching a small green tent. It looked like a temporary hangar. Buses and automobiles were parked in front of it. It was also a sign that many people were in it.

As the Senryu stopped, I followed suit behind it. But, a guide was coming and directed me to move forward even more. I raced the engine a bit more again, and had the aircraft move forward. Many people stepped aside ahead of me to make way for my aircraft. *It's dangerous. What are they gonna do, if they are caught in the propellers?* I proceeded to the space before the tent. Finally, a flag was raised and I put on the brake.

I stopped the engine. I did not want to see what was going on around me. The propeller sound was getting gradually quieter, and it was being replaced with the stir in the crowd instead. I sat in the seat deep and tried not to look outside.

Sigh.

This kind of job, again ...

That's just too bad, really.

But, is it really too bad?

I was thinking about the Teacher. Considering the fact that he was a hero, he must have been doing a job like this. Come to think of it, he went on duty trips very often. *Was it the reason why he quit? No, he did it probably because of me ...*

My name was called, so I could do nothing but raise my head to take a look outside. Kai, standing before the canard wing, was looking at me.

I pushed up the canopy. As I expected, the air was disgustingly moist and uncomfortably warm. I felt as if the breaths of people around the tent were gathered and dissolved into the air as the sound and smell.

“Time to get on the ground.” Kai said, while beckoning me.

I removed my seat belt, stood up, and stepped on the main wing. I tried to look around as little as possible, grabbed a bag with my hand, and got my feet on the surface.

“Remove your helmet.” Kai whispered, while approaching me.

I moved the goggles upward and then took off the helmet. My hair might have been acting sulky, but I had decided not to care about it. I made a slight sigh.

As expected, many flashlights flooded into me.

To protect my eyes, I looked downward.

It's asphalt. The ground underneath, as if in trying to swell forcefully, seemed to be cracking the asphalt. There was no shadow of mine. The weather was inclement, and the overall illuminance of the environment was indicating that it would be raining soon.

With my back pushed by Kai, I walked.

“Are you feeling lousy?” She asked in a low voice into my ear.

“Yes, a little.” I answered honestly.

“What is the reason for that?” As she exhaled while chuckling, Kai whispered.

“I will recover soon, I think.” I raised my head to look at her.

Again, flashlights.

It was the very moment in which I wanted to put on the goggles. The ones known as camera staffs just did not care about others' eye health.

We were getting even closer to the tent, where many people who were holding microphones in their hands were trying to rush straight to us. Uniformed staffs stopped them and split them in two like a wedge plow train would do the accumulated snow. Before I knew it, I and Kai were walking while being surrounded by six men. They were stout, big men wearing black suits. *Okay, I am*

guarded. I felt as if I were a bomber aircraft. *Is there a possibility that I can be shot?* I raised my head and looked around. There was no tall building nearby, and we did not need to worry about being shot from a higher place. However, if handguns were mounted on those camera flashes, then we would all be shot to death by now.

We entered the tent. Even though it was a temporary facility, it was a big structure with decent doors. It was intended for mooring aircrafts. A smaller, square building was inside the tent, and Kai entered it. The entrance was elevated and a stepstool was set before it.

The place was like an office, and no one was inside. A desk was placed at the back of the room. On the side of the entrance was a small table with sofas on both sides. She occupied one of them, and showed me the other to sit down.

“Are you surprised?” Kai looked at me and smiled.

“No, ma’am.” I shook my head.

“Take a rest here for about five hours. Would you prefer coffee?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Kai looked at the door. I looked back and found one of the security guards standing there. He nodded and moved away. If that man was going to make coffee for me, that would be funny.

“And then?” I asked.

“We are going to the headquarters.”

“Headquarters?”

“Yes.”

Honestly, I was surprised by that. I did not know our headquarters was in this city. More correctly, the information was not disclosed officially. I had heard the rumor that nobody, except for the relevant players, knew where the headquarters was.

But, what will we be doing at the headquarters?

After a while, a shutter was opened and the work to pull the Senryu and Sanka in the tent started. About half of the media crew were still left outside and tried to take

pictures of aircrafts. I was observing it through the slit of the blind.

After the aircrafts were moored, the shutter was closed. The light was turned on in the tent. By that time, Kai was sitting at the desk to speak on the phone and I was sipping the coffee.

Holding a cup in my hand, I went out of the office and walked closer to the aircrafts. A few mechanics were working. I found the one who appeared to be the leader of the mechanics, and gave him orders and advice.

“Ma’am, I think you need not worry. We are going to put it in a good condition with meticulous care.” The man said. *This is indeed a big city environment. Even a mechanic is speaking in such a polite tone.* For some reason, I was feeling unsettled. *Will it be really okay? I wish Sasakura were here.*

Kai got out of the tent. I was left alone in the office. Magazines and newspapers were placed near the sofa, so I read them. I could somewhat get from them how our works were being treated in general. But, I was not so much interested in it. One magazine featured travels for visiting famous places in the world and many photographs were on the pages. I felt that I wanted to visit the places. However, Even if I went there, I could find nothing, probably. All that I would find were exactly the same things as what were in the photographs. *That’s all.*

-3-

Kai came back, and we got into an automobile in front of the tent. The press corps had already left. It was at dusk.

The car kept running on the premises for a while. After going through the procedure at the iron fence gate, our vehicle got out of the facility. It entered a highway, and moved very slowly among an immense number of automobiles. It was as if each engine was smoldering. Other vehicles running right beside ours was a mysterious scene for me. I was impressed by how they managed to avoid the collisions with each other.

As the car exited from the highway, I noticed that there were many traffic signals. The duration of waiting for the traffic light was several-fold longer than drive time. The traffic was so slow that we could have moved faster by walking on foot. Still,

pedestrians were also waiting for the signals to change. *Do they not realize that there are way too many people and vehicles in the city area?*

By the time we got to the city center, it had become completely dark. Illuminations were bright to the level that it was rather blinding. We also saw many billboards and marquees. There were many lights that were blinking. Some of the signboards were moving. I also saw a huge TV screen. The roadway was filled with automobiles and the walkways of both sides were packed with a larger number of people. Mysteriously, everyone was walking without words. They seemed to be rushing to some other places. Merchandises were displayed in large shop windows. For example, clothes worn by dolls and even actual automobiles were displayed in some cases. *How could they manage to put them into the display cases?* I heard occasional honking of the horns, and fragments of music being played somewhere.

Our driver was wearing white gloves, and he was the type of person who did not seem to be able to understand our language. He did not even look back. I could not see his face even with the aid of the rearview mirror. The man suddenly turned the steering wheel, and the vehicle got on a walkway. Then, we reached the entrance of a building. A downhill path followed immediately. It was a road that was for leading us to the underground.

Not a few gray pillars were lined up, and large automobiles were parked between them. There was only one brightly lit spot. I saw a room with stainless steel walls through a glass door. In front of it, I and Kai got out of the vehicle.

The stainless steel room was an elevator hall. Tall security guards were standing on both sides of the glass door. Kai inserted her ID card into a strange machine. Its purpose seemed to be for opening the door. I wondered for what purposes the security guards were standing there. They were staring at me with the curious looks in their eyes. They might be wondering why I was at the place. Kai said nothing, and passed by in front of them.

There were four elevators in total. We got into the innermost one.

With dull acceleration, it was going up. The four walls were reflecting us like mirrors.

“So, what’s next, ma’am?” I asked.

“We are about to meet my boss.” Kai answered immediately. “That’s okay. You

should worry about nothing.”

“I don’t worry about anything.” I nodded slightly.

“I do worry, actually.” Kai curved her lips. Surely, it was an unusual expression that was being generated with her face. *Don’t tell me. Is she nervous?*

The elevator stopped at the 37th floor. As we got outside and walked in the corridor, the lighting got brighter and the door at the end opened. We entered a room with a carpet whose pattern consisted of concentric circles. A reception desk was at the back of the room. A woman standing there bowed to us.

“I’m Kai.” Kai told the woman. “Tell Mr. Kayaba that ...” She glanced back at me. “I am bringing Kusanagi here.”

The woman nodded and picked up the telephone receiver. She spoke something in an inaudible voice. Then, “You may enter,” she showed a door beside her with a hand.

The door was opened immediately. It was also an elevator, not a room. I was waiting for Kai to move, but she did not. Then, she looked at me.

“You are going alone.” Kai said.

“Okay.” While feeling surprised, I nodded calmly.

The small elevator, containing just me, went up by approximately a dozen more floors. The door opened. It was an office-like space with white walls. Again, a woman was attending at a counter right in front of me. She got out of the counter and bowed to me.

“Ma’am ... this way, please.”

I walked down the corridor. The lady stopped in the middle, knocked the door, and opened it. It was a large door. I entered the room.

The room was spacious and a big painted picture was decorated on a wall. I also saw a bookshelf. Beautifully bound books were lined up in it. They were not like thin, small-sized books I usually read.

A huge vase was on a cabinet and was holding several pieces of what appeared to be bird feathers. Toward my side, there were three black leather sofas.

A desk was by a window. A man stood up and was approaching me. Despite the spaciousness of the room, he was the only one in it, other than me at that point.

“I’m Kusanagi.” I made a salute.

“Okay, have a seat over there.” He said with a smile.

I was not sure which seat to take. I waited until he took a seat in an armchair. Then, he indicated the coordinate again with his hand. I sat on whatever the hand was apparently indicating.

“I’m Kayaba. Nice to meet you.” It was a mild voice.

“Nice to meet you, too.” I lowered my head.

Carefully, he was gazing at me. *How old is he? Nearly sixty, maybe.* Half of his hair was gray. He was wearing a pair of rimless glasses. His protruding eyes were giving him a slightly terrifying impression. His body was slim. His hands were extremely large. He was wearing no tie. It was a black suit, and not a military uniform. He crossed his legs.

“Ms. Kai gave me detailed information about you. I am inviting you here because of a mission to ask you to engage in, obviously.” He spoke slowly. It sounded deep as it was reverberating. “Walk to the window and take a look outside.”

I passed by his desk and looked outside through a large windowpane. A lot of tall buildings were standing around the vicinity. I looked down, and found even more abundant shorter buildings.

“Excuse me.” A door was opened, and a young man entered.

He was carrying cups on a tray. While he put them on the table, I waited. After he left the room, I walked back to the sofa.

“I would like you to fly in this city.” Kayaba explained. “I mean, around this building, through the valleys between the skyscrapers, I would like you to fly a Sanka.”

“If I am commanded to do so, I will fly anywhere.” I nodded.

“It might be slightly dangerous.”

“No, sir. It is not all that dangerous in particular.”

“I do not mean your danger. I am concerned about the citizens below.”

“I understand, sir.” I paused once. After a little hesitation, I asked. “Sir, may I ask you a question?”

“I guess you want to ask the reason for your having to fly in the city environment. But, you need not know that. However, it is not just one of PR activities. We will not do anything that risky, just for that reason. Do you understand what I mean? It is an important mission. The political necessity and our company are directly linked to the core of this nation. Therefore, you may regard it as a part of a national project.”

“I now understand, sir.” Although I understood nothing, I was understanding that it was better for me not to understand.

“For a specific plan, I will hand you a document later. The flight will be conducted on the day after tomorrow at the earliest. It depends on the weather.”

“I appreciate it, sir.”

Kayaba took a cup from the table, and brought it to his mouth. I was sitting up straight, without moving a bit.

In my mind, I was thinking about the acrobatic flight in which I would be flying in the valleys between the skyscrapers. *What political meaning does it have? Is it exaggerated? Or, is it a modest expression?* In any case, such a suggestive expression possesses as much meaning as adjectives like “beautiful” or “dazzling”, just like neon-lit signboards and marquees.

“I have heard of you from the Teacher as well.”

I raised my head and accepted his gaze. I did not show any emotion with my face, but I was a little bit startled because I could not expect at all the name to be heard in that occasion.

“He was my longtime friend ... I frequently recommended him to quit as a pilot. An executive post was waiting for him. But, I could not persuade him to take the offer. What about you?”

“I think the persuasion would be difficult to attain.” I answered immediately.

“I see.” Kayaba smiled. “I wonder what stirs you up to be pilots. It is not easy to

understand for me. I guess I would not be able to understand the reason for your obsession, no matter how much you may try to explain it to me. But, of course, I have the respect for your nature like that. I recognize that it is valuable. So, if possible, I would like to grant you the wish that you possess.”

“Really ...? Sir, in that case ...”

“You want to do dogfights. You want to go back to the battlefield. Is that right?”

“Yes, sir. Please ...” I stood up and bowed my head. “I beg you, sir. I will do anything for that. So please send me back to the former assignment, to the former airbase.”

“Well, have a seat.” Kayaba showed his palm.

“I’m sorry, sir.” After apologizing, I sat down slowly.

“No, you don’t have to apologize. I understand well what you want. No, I have already understood. Still, our company does not want to lose you. That’s all. If we had two of you, then we would dispatch one of you to a battlefield as you wish. I would like you to understand our circumstances.”

“Yes, sir. I think I can understand that. I sincerely apologize for my selfish remarks.”

“What type of relationship did you have with the Teacher?” Suddenly, Kayaba asked me a different question.

“Relationship ...? What do you mean, sir ...?” I asked, and cocked my head. It was my act of complete dissemblance. “I learned a lot from him.”

“Is that all there is to your relationship?”

I was desperately receiving the gaze that Kayaba was directing fixedly at me. Although it was exhausting, I had to endure. He just told me that he was an old friend of the Teacher. *Has he perhaps heard something about me from the Teacher? Maybe.* I was contemplating for a moment, whether I had to make a confession or not.

“We do not fully understand the reason why he left the company.” Kayaba spoke. “Have you not heard anything from him about the possible reason for his resignation?”

“He was apparently against the concept of pusher configuration aircrafts.”

“We understand that. But, if the issue were as significant as that, then we would have just offered a tractor configuration aircraft just for him. It is hard for us to believe that the reason was that trivial.”

“Then, I have no idea.”

“Really.” He turned his heavy gaze toward me again. I endured it while feeling tense. “I would like you to stay at a hotel room in this building. I will have the detailed information about the project delivered to you tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then, happy hunting.” Kayaba stood up.

I stood up too, and made a salute.

-4-

It was a room on the 25th floor. After taking a shower, I lay down on a bed and watched the TV. Many were noisy shows. But, one channel was showing a documentary program featuring ancient ruins, and I decided to watch it. I wrapped a towel around my wet hair. I raised my upper body in the middle, and held a cushion. The air conditioner was working a little too well, and it was getting rather hot.

I heard the sound from the intercom. I put on a gown hastily and walked to the door. I peeked through a gap in the door I just opened. A uniformed porter was standing there.

“Ms. Kusanagi, I have a message for you.”

“Thank you.”

I received an envelope through the narrow opening of the door. When I went back to the bed and was about to open it, a telephone started ringing.

“Yes, this is Kusanagi.” I picked up the receiver.

“This is Kai speaking. Originally, I myself was scheduled to explain it to you. But now, Kayaba has just told me that the schedule had been changed.”

“Ma’am? What are you talking about?”

“A person in charge belonging to the other side wants to meet you. So, we have changed the plan. Go to the meeting place by yourself, while following our instruction. That’s okay. You need not worry about anything.”

“Instruction? I got the message just now.”

“Yes. That’s it.”

“I have yet to read it.”

“I just want to tell you that the message is reliable and legitimate.”

“Got it.”

“Let us meet each other in two hours.”

“Yes, ma’am. I understand.” I looked at a clock beside the bed. *It’s 19:30.*

I put the receiver back on the phone unit, and opened the envelope of the message. With polite sentences, it was inviting me to a meeting to be held in a lounge on the 30th floor at 20:00. Only the name of a company that I did not know and what appeared to be the sender’s initials were written.

I was not hungry at that point. I wondered if the lounge was a place to drink or a restaurant. *What attire should I put on to go there?* To begin with, my attire options were too few to select the garment coordination from. In the end, I put on a sweater, my casual wear, and left the room five minutes before the scheduled meeting time.

I went up to the 30th floor by elevator, and found the lounge soon enough. A waiter was getting closer to me.

“Good evening, madam. Do you have a reservation?”

“Umm, I’m not sure. I was just ordered to come here.”

“May I ask your name, madam?”

“Kusanagi.”

“Yes, certainly we have the reservation. Come this way, please.”

I entered the dark lounge. Most of the seats by the bar counter and tables were occupied with the customers. I could hear quiet blues music. I wondered if frequent small metallic sounds were from the kitchen. Beside that, voices and laughter of many customers were steadily echoing like a radio noise.

At the innermost table surrounded by potted plants, a man, who was probably the one I have got the reservation with, was already seated. He was wearing a hat and a pair of glasses. I took the other seat. The waiter asked me about what to drink. I ordered a hot tea.

“We have many types of teas. What kind would you like to have, madam?”

“Anything is okay.” I answered.

The waiter walked away from the table.

It was too dark to see the man’s face.

“Nice to meet you.” I greeted.

“Long time no see, Kusanagi.” The man said.

The voice rendered my whole body paralyzed in a moment.

I could not move. I held my breath.

I was staring fixedly at the man in the dark.

I felt chills in my back and around my thighs.

Finally, I took a breath.

I let my body lean forward by about 50 centimeters.

He picked up a cigarette case with a large hand.

He pulled out a cigarette.

Then, he lit it.

Smoke.

Teacher!

I wanted to shout.

I wanted to stand up.

I might have wanted to hug him.

But.

For some reason, my body would not move.

Smoke.

Silence.

Smoke.

More smoke.

More silence.

It's dark.

The glass table was faintly reflecting the light.

It was wet.

The waiter was approaching us, and was putting a cup and a pot in front of me.

But, they were completely out of my sight.

Smoke.

It was moving.

While capturing the faint light.

The smoke was exhaled from the darkness, floated toward my side, and was mixed with the light.

His hand.

The red light of the cigarette.

Glowing.

Smoke.

Silence.

“Have you been doing all right?”

I nodded.

I took a breath.

Agony.

But, I am okay.

I would prefer feeling the torment.

I am okay.

I take a breath.

When I came to, my vision was blurred with tears. I wiped them with fingers.

My fingers were getting wet.

They were becoming hot.

“Why have you come here?” I asked.

But, once I spoke the words, I understood the answer.

Got it. The Teacher is also being summoned for this project.

“But, why?” I inquired. “Are you being transferred to this company again?”

“No.” He answered. *A low voice. Same, old as usual.*

Same old ...? How old is it?

How old is the same old?

Oh, my. It has already been a long time ago, really ...

Why now, like this?

Why, so suddenly?

He sat up straight and reached for an ashtray on the table. I could see a part of his face. My eyes were getting used to the darkness. He was wearing weird glasses. His hair had gotten a bit longer. Those were the points that were indicating the changes. The rest remained the same.

“I am still your enemy.” Saying so, the Teacher’s mouth was slightly curving to show that he was smiling. I myself might have been smiling by seeing it. “The ridiculous event in this occasion has been planned for the continued existences of both companies. So, they are staging the show. Even before that, politicians have been staging much bigger farces. Compared to them, our stage would be just a curtain raiser.”

“Teacher, are you going to fly, too?”

“You and I are.”

“The two of us?”

“That is correct ... Here, in this city, we will dance for them. It was planned by those who do not understand real dances. Let’s show them what we’ve got, shall we?”

“Sure, of course ... But ...”

“I look forward to learning how much more formidable you have become.”

“Are you telling me that it will not be an acrobatic flight?” I asked.

He tossed an envelope, which had been placed on a chair beside him, onto the table. I took it. *A large envelope.* I loosened the string tying the closure, and then opened it. Several sheets of documents were bound in it.

I skimmed it.

The word “combat” was underlined.

The fonts of “actual fight” were in boldface.

“It’s a duel.” The Teacher explained. He put out the cigarette on the ashtray. “Do not pull your punches. Fight against me seriously.”

“Alright.” I nodded immediately.

Then, I contemplated it desperately.

A dogfight.

An actual combat.

A duel.

Is it true?

Is this for real?

That’s what I wish for.

How long have I been longing for this?

I have even been dreaming of this.

My pulse was going faster, and my body was getting hot. I picked up a cup and sipped the tea. I started regretting that I had not ordered a cold drink.

I can duel against the Teacher.

I can dance with the Teacher.

There is no way that I will pull punches?

Is there anything else to this, other than going legit and being serious?

How much have I been craving for this opportunity?

“Thank you.” I bowed my head. “Thank you so much, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have given me this opportunity, correct?”

“I am not the one responsible for this.”

“But, perhaps, you must have been the big influence on this issue.”

“Do not get it wrong.” He shook his head. “Let me make it clear. I do not want this. I never want to fight against you. But it’s my job. It cannot be helped. I got the information that my opponent would be Suito Kusanagi. If so, I wanted to see you before one of us would go down. I just made this demand, and they granted me the permission. Being here with you now is as much as what I can do. Have you met Kayaba, the one working in this building?”

“Yes, I have.”

“For the sake of longtime friendship between me and him, he has given us the opportunity for this secret meeting.”

“I will do my best. We will dance a good fight.” I lowered my head.

“You are surely the same crazy self.”

“I respect you. At the risk of my life, I will ...” I could not muster the next words. Tears were running down my cheeks. They even got into my mouth. I sensed the taste of tears. I myself did not understand why I was crying. “I will do my best. Please look forward to it, sir.”

“Okay.” The Teacher nodded. “I do not intend to treat you with kid gloves. To begin with, I am not in the position to do that sort of thing.”

He held out his hand. I was not sure what the action meant. I felt I wanted to grab the large hand.

I extended my both hands and touched his hand.

After that, I finally noticed that I was offered to shake hands.

“I have one advice for you.”

“What is it?”

“Do not wait.”

“Sir?”

“If you wait, no good thing will happen. Believe yourself, trust your feelings, and shoot at any time.”

I let go of his hand.

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

“In the latest duel between us, you let me disengage because of the momentary hesitation. It was by half a second.”

“Got it.”

“Shoot before you think you will shoot.”

“I will shoot before I think I will shoot.”

“If you can do that, no one will be able to shoot you down.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tears kept running, and my voice was rendered unclear, because my breathing was becoming like a knocking of an engine.

“See you then.” He stood up.

I stood up, too.

“Maintain your physical condition. Sleep well and relax.”

“I will.”

He stood in front of me.

I raise my hand and made a salute.

He did not change his expression and looked into my eyes.

Then, he slowly raised his hand and made a salute.

He turned around, and walked away.

I saw him off until he vanished into the darkness.

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On the following day, I went to the airfield in the morning. I got off a taxi before the backdoor and asked a guard at the gate to let me enter. Luckily, the guard already knew my face, and I did not have to show my ID card. I jogged to the tent. It was a suitable amount of exercise.

The door of the tent was left open. I was at the location to check the status of the maintenance, obviously.

The cowling was removed from my Sanka. A young mechanic was working alone. He showed a slightly surprised look when he saw me.

“May I ask you what you are doing?” I asked.

“Umm, I’m doing maintenance ...”

I was waiting for his explanation after that, but he said no more and went back to work. I was standing beside him and observing his work for a while. I noticed that there was something odd about what he was doing. He was trying to loosen a fine adjustment screw for tuning a needle valve.

“Wait.” I raised my voice and opened a palm. “What are you doing? Please give me the explanation.”

The mechanic widened his eyes and looked at me. He looked frightened, and showed an unnatural facial expression, as if he was trying to laugh.

“Why are you loosening that part?”

“Oh, umm, I was ordered to adjust it, ma’am.”

“What adjustment?”

“Of fuel mixture ratio.”

“I understand that. Why do you need to change the mixture ratio?”

“I think it is the matter of altitude, ma’am.”

“Altitude?”

Another man was entering the tent. It was the one whom I met yesterday. He seemed to be the leader of the maintenance crew. He immediately noticed that the mechanic and I were glaring at each other.

“May I know what is going on, ma’am?”

“Well, I am just demanding his explanation about what he is doing.” I answered in as mild a tone as possible. “I mean, he is trying to loosen the air mixture adjustment.”

“Ah, it is what I ordered. I apologize. I have been intending to explain it to you later, ma’am.”

“I think the rule is that I am given the explanation in advance.”

“Of course, we understand. However, we do not have enough time for everything, for the actual combat is scheduled to take place tomorrow. We have to make the fine-tuning, and run the engine for checking. I was going to talk with you about the adjustment, including the results.”

“Why do you need to change it? It has been in a good condition.”

“As I told you, it is because the altitude is low.”

“Low altitude?”

“That is correct. Is that not the way it is going to be, ma’am?”

“I am not sure if the altitude is going to be low.”

“But, I heard that it is going to be low.”

I was reminded of the project protocol that I read in the bed. *Now I remember. I read such statements about that issue. However, during an actual combat situation, aircrafts tend to want to ascend more and more. Gaining the higher altitude than the enemy leads to getting the advantage.*

“I don’t need such adjustments.” I said. “I would like you not to change anything.”

“In cities, air is polluted. The density of carbon dioxide is also high. The air

contains much vapor. In order to allow the engine to exert the power in this city, we have to change the mixture ratio. We have our local know-hows. Please entrust us with this matter.”

Many words were on the tip of my tongue, but they were too weak to possess enough momentum to come out of my mouth. I could do nothing but swallow them and nod without words. Then, I broke away from him, and took refuge in the office.

I sat on the sofa and looked up at the ceiling.

I was feeling restless. It was as if my body was becoming a hunk of meat. It was an object I had to move with effort. *Am I feeling nervous? Maybe, I am.* The thought of dueling against the Teacher was giving me the pressure. If I suddenly encountered him when I piloted my aircraft, then my mind would not have been rendered awkward like this. At that point, I was not in the cockpit. So, both my mind and my body were unsettled. Probably, it was the reason.

I lit a cigarette, but I could not enjoy the taste. I soon put it out, sat back in the sofa, and closed my eyes.

Will I emerge victorious over him?

How many times did I utter the question in the bed the night before? *If I am in the sky, I will not have any doubt about it. If I am holding the control stick, I will not feel any anxiety. I will shoot him down absolutely. I will keep flying.* I could have that much faith in myself. *Still, on the ground, I cannot do that.* I was getting anxious about everything.

When I woke up that morning, the only thing in my mind was to go to the place where my aircraft was moored. In short, I wanted to erase the inevitable anxiety within myself. *Once I enter the cockpit, it would vanish.* I believed so.

“Would you like some coffee?” A sudden voice. I looked back and found Kai standing by the door.

“Oh, yes, ma’am ...” I stood up and made a salute. “Good morning.”

One young uniformed man, standing behind Kai, nodded and left. I guessed that he was in charge of coffee.

“Are you okay? You look sleepy.” Kai entered the room and sat on the sofa

opposite me.

“If anything, lack of sleep, maybe.” I sat down again. I found myself making a slight sigh. “I was worried about my aircraft so much that I have ended up coming here.”

“I knew you would do so.”

“But, ma’am ...” I turned my face half toward the direction of the aircraft. Since the door was closed, I could not see the aircraft. “They are trying to adjust the engine without my permission. I had not heard anything about it. I was given the explanation earlier, about their trying to fine-tune the aircraft in order to allow the aircraft to be able to fly in the low altitude of this city. But I have never experienced such a flight. If possible, I would like the setting to stay the same. I feel more comfortable that way.”

“I get it. I will do something about it.” Kai was about to light a cigarette, but she decided not to do so and stood up.

She got out of the office space through the door. I wanted to follow her, but decided to stay put. Once I have spoken to her about the issue, it would be rude for me to follow her. In addition, I ended up tattling to my supervisor about the maintenance. I felt a little guilty about it.

Coffee was delivered to me before Kai got back. The man entered the room and placed two cups on the table. The cups were made of plastic and looked light. I wondered if a vending machine was installed nearby. While I was considering whether to ask him the location, the man made a salute and left the room.

Since when have I gotten up to such a high position, to get a treatment like this? The thought crossed my mind. I was complaining about how mechanics were dealing with my aircraft. Everyone around me were saluting me, but I was ignoring them.

Am I angry?

Am I feeling nervous?

I could feel it.

If I continued to stay put, then I might start shivering.

I want to fly as soon as possible.

Can they not allow me to fly, even if it may turn out to be just for an engine test? But it was not an airbase I was in. Passenger airplanes were taking off and landing on a constant basis. I could not do such a selfish thing.

At least, I want to get into the cockpit.

I want to hold the control stick.

Kai came back. I sat straight and pretended to be in a normal condition. She was fixing her gaze at me and smiled a bit.

“You are nervous, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” I nodded honestly. “I’m thrilled.”

“About what?”

“I get the chance to engage in combat.”

“Really ...” After sipping coffee, Kai held the cigarette, which she had taken out of the case earlier, in her mouth and lit it. “So, what do you think? Do you have any chance of winning?”

“Ma’am, you know who my opponent is.”

“Of course, I do.” Kai exhaled the smoke and laughed. “There is probably nothing that you know and that I don’t know. Well, except for matters pertaining to aircrafts, that is.”

“Pardon me. I am talking more than I should.”

“Well, no, it’s not what I mean.” With her smile, Kai closed her eyes once. Then, while exhaling the smoke slowly, she opened her eyes. She was gazing fixedly at me.

“The chance for winning ... Maybe, fifty-fifty, I think.” I answered. “If the former version of me fought against the Teacher in the past, I would never win over him. But now, I think I can.”

“You think you can win, or the chance is fifty-fifty. Which is true? I think there is a huge difference between them.” Kai put on a serious mien on her face again. She was still looking at me.

“If there is a fifty-fifth chance, I will win.” I answered.

“I don’t understand what you mean.” She shook her head.

“I have won in all the occasions which indicated the objective data of fifty-fifty chance. That is why I have survived to this day.” I stated. “If I have no less than the fifty percent of probability, then I will win with certainty.”

“That’s odd confidence.”

“It is not confidence.”

“Then ... What is it?”

“I think it’s premonition, ma’am.” Although that was the answer I spoke, it was the second word I came up with in my mind. If I said it honestly, the answer would have been “resignation”.

“Really ...” Kai exhaled the smoke, as if she was taking a deep breath. “I now understand that it might have been a meaningless question.” She started chuckling. *I think there aren’t too many of those who can laugh in this situation. It is the proof that she is fortified with more definite confidence than what I have.*

“Ma’am, what shall I do today?” I asked.

“Well ... Why don’t you drink coffee first? It’s getting cold.”

I nodded and took a cup.

“I have nothing to ask you to do today. We will keep the mass media and journalists out. You can do anything wherever you like. I am guessing that you will be within the vicinity of this space, correct?”

“Yes. I think I will take a walk outside. Ma’am, may I go anywhere on the premises?”

“Taking a walk?”

“Umm, I just want to run a bit. I want to lose my weight.”

“Oh?” Kai sounded surprised. “Losing your weight? More than you have lost up to this point?”

“I have been absent from the airbase, and I have gotten out of shape because of that.”

“You do not look like you are out of shape.” Kai warped her lips. “Rather than taking exercises, shouldn’t you relax by taking a nap or doing something of the

sort?”

“Thank you for your advice, ma’am.”

“Let’s have dinner tonight again.” Kai said with a serious look. “If you do not dislike it, that is.”

“I do not dislike it. However, if possible, I want to be alone.”

“Alright. Do as you like.”

Whenever I looked at her, I always wondered why she could easily make such a gentle face at will.

-6-

The weather was slightly cloudy like the day before. There was no wind, and it was not cold. I was running on the premises of the airport. I was careful not to approach the area where many people were expected to be at. Looking at the runway sideways, I headed for the back gate. I passed it by and crossed the bridge over a narrow waterway. I saw lighting poles still ahead of me. Passenger airplanes need such a vast real estate to take off and land.

I reached a place covered with short weeds, which were turned brown and withering. That was the end of the path, so I stepped into the grass field. Since I could not run in the area, I walked while watching my steps. Finally, a two-meter-high iron fence entered my sight, as I got closer to it. On top of it, barbed wires, angled outward, were mounted. On the other side of the fence, I saw mostly farm fields. Beyond the farms, buildings that appeared to be for residential purposes were standing. There were roads, with no car traffic. I was surprised to learn that there still were such places in an urban area. Perhaps, there were some regulations that would not allow the construction of tall structures, because there was an airport nearby.

As I walked along the fence, I noticed that there was an exposed concrete foundation on the ground. *Is there a drainage canal or something like that beneath it?* I felt that the height was just about right for me to take a seat on, so I decided to sit down on it to take a rest. It was about three meters away from the iron fence.

The sound was approaching me from behind. I looked back and found a gigantic passenger airplane getting closer to me. It was deflecting its flaps downward to the maximum, and was slowly entering the runway. I lied on the concrete while facing the sky, and waited for the airplane to pass right above me.

It is going overhead.

After that, the air vibrated slightly.

The passenger airplane lowered the altitude, and let the wheels touch down on the surface. It got far away in a moment. It was like a train passing by me, as if I was at a subway station. I was thinking that I would not want to get onto it. *Yeah, the same as subways. If I get on it, I would experience almost the same sensation.*

If I quit the job as a pilot, what would I do next?

Perhaps, the situation in which I have to quit might happen in the future.

I had never thought of the issue.

I could not imagine my quitting the job while being still alive.

When I was young, had I not had various dreams? One time, I wanted to take a trip to a distant country and explore the jungle. Another time, I wanted to ride a motorcycle through the desert. *But, that is not what you call a life. How do I live? What can I do with my life?*

I imagined that I would be working at a factory in the future when I grew up. *I assemble the same things every day.* I thought it would be a little fun. But, could there be such an enjoyable work? *I get the salary and come back home in the evening. I have to get on a commuter train, and walk among the crowd. We have to feign the looks of innocence, even if people who do not know mutually are way too close to each other to the level of making physical contact.* Urban areas are such places. The breaths exhaled from humans make air in subways hopelessly murky. I rode on a subway just once, and could not stand the air. I would not be able to stay alive, without putting on an oxygen mask. *I smell various odors. Too many odors. In the current environment that I am in, I smell only the exhaust of the engine. Nothing is simpler than this. There is nothing but a temptingly sweet scent.*

I was sensing the fragrance now. Even though the place was in the urban area, it was an airfield. It was the reason why I could still stay alive.

I closed my eyes.

I still felt unsettled because of the issue pertaining to the engine maintenance. I wondered if it was going well. The unpleasant feeling was like getting my own body being touched. However, I have to remember that the mechanics were doing what they believed was a good thing to do. I could not just drive them off.

Ah, I get it. They are assigning me a mission to dance close to the ground. Come to think of it, when I observed the outside view from Kayaba's office, I was surely looking down on the cityscape. I did not look up at the sky. I was viewing the valleys between the skyscrapers, wasn't I? Since I was a human born on earth, would I end up missing the ground level no matter how dirty it was, just because I was a human born on earth?

Suddenly, I was reminded of something.

About the life, which was about to be born from my body.

The Teacher did not say anything about it the night before.

Neither did I.

It did not even cross my mind. I just had the excitement and the joy of getting to encounter him in the sky again.

I felt relieved, because I said nothing, and he did not mention it. *It's a trivial issue. Although it is trivial, why do I recall it now and try to think about it? Why is it disturbing me? Maybe, I get the impression that it is for the same reason as that for my inability to live apart from the ground.* The places from which we were born fatefully haunt humans. *Those who can fly are not the ones born in the sky. Even birds hatch from eggs on the ground.*

I had several images. I had not seen the new life with my own eyes. *If I looked at it, I would not be able to deny it. Once it entered my sight, I could do nothing but admit it.* However, as of then, it was just a word. No more than just the imagination. Therefore, even though vague images came up in my mind, I could laugh it off and dismiss it. Like a windshield wiper, in a moment, I could wipe out things that were twining around me, to make its sight clear ...

I have something that I have to see.

It is an enemy aircraft, lunging at me.

Only if I had the image in my mind.

I could forget everything else immediately.

Yes, indeed.

That is the function that is granted only to those who fly.

The privilege that is given only to the fliers.

My pulse is going faster, and I am focusing my attention.

I look straight at the image of the enemy ahead of me.

It is always visible.

I do not blink.

I chase it.

I am leaning toward the direction to which the enemy is moving.

I am revolving.

I am getting used to it.

I approach it like a wind.

I target it like lightning.

Then, I shoot.

As if the bullet was released directly from my mind.

In a straight line. In the momentary glow.

I see the hope.

Looking at every single hope.

I whirl like a wind.

I dance like lightning.

Then, flipping over.

Breaking away.

Sliding in the air.

I dodge like a wind.

I dive like lightning.

Then, I pass by.

Smoke.

Clouds.

Rainbows.

Light like a wind.

Unstoppable like lightning.

Then, flow with the stream.

For the time.

For the moment.

For the slight chance.

I think for them, and I feel alive.

I can die anytime.

Death is nothing to me.

I live to die.

I have nothing that I am afraid of.

Come on, everyone. Come and get me.

I will shoot you down.

I will make you go down cleanly for you.

Beautifully ...

In the end, they would see the light. Anyone would feel it is beautiful.

Because the dignity of humanity is in the light.

It doesn't exist on the ground.

The glow cannot be found on the ground.

On the ground, those who are already dead fear death, and they only see the gray sky covered with clouds.

There's no hope.

Because those who are already dead cannot die cleanly.

Oh, yes ...

I seem to desire to die in the sky.

I have just realized that.

All I have to do is to go down to heaven above the clouds. It's easy.

So, are you craving for fighting this much, Suito Kusanagi?

Probably, yes.

You do not want to live anymore.

Is that not right?

It is not wrong.

However ...

Still, I knew that.

I would go back to the ground in the end.

I would touch down on the runway properly.

Why?

Are you afraid of passing through the clouds and falling to the ground?

Maybe, that might be the answer.

Incidentally, I could see lights even on the ground, to some extent. Not all the people were disgusting jackasses. Sometimes, there are joyous moments. *After all, is it the subtle curiosity about the possibility of such unknowns yet to be discovered?*

I opened my eyes.

The sky was bright.

Even though it was cloudy and gray like this, I could still feel that it was blinding. Just by closing the eyes, anyone would find anything to be bright. After all, people work hard by doing this sort of thing, to perceive things, which are not all that beautiful, as something beautiful. *I might be able to conclude that those who live in such a*

way are human beings.

I stood up and decided to go back. It was already past noon. *I am returning to the tent. I will check the status of the maintenance again. No, if I do so, I will definitely be irritated. Should I go back to the hotel and take a nap? But, I might not be able to sleep at night. I do not quite feel like going out somewhere. I dislike crowded places.*

I was running again on my way back.

When I reached the tent, I was slightly breaking a sweat. The maintenance was still going on and the engine was remaining exposed. There were two mechanics. They noticed me. Nervous expressions. I said nothing, entered the office, and closed the door. No one else was in the room.

I lay down on the sofa and put my head on the armrest. A florescent light was nearby, so I closed my eyes.

I experienced the sensation, as if my body was going far away.

I changed my mind to sleep a little. I put my cap down to cover my eyes, and decided to sleep there. At times, I heard faint metallic sounds of maintenance work. And the roaring sound of many passenger airplanes taking off and landing. Still, it was quiet. Only around me, it was quiet.

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I could manage to sleep for about one hour. I did not have a dream. Then, I walked to a lobby of the airport and bought a book. Since I was wearing everyday clothes and a cap, I was not spoken to by anyone. I soon got out of the lobby to go back to the office, and started reading the book on a sofa.

Each time I heard a large sound, I stood up and surveyed the situation of the maintenance. I felt unsettled because I was being paranoid enough to think that my aircraft was beaten or bullied. I looked at the clock over and over again. I calculated how many hours I still had until tomorrow.

I declined Kai's offer to have dinner together, so I had to eat it alone. I thought of going back to the hotel and had a meal in my own room. I wanted to avoid any place where others would get close to me.

Ah, now I see ...

Kai must have thought it might turn out to be Suito Kusanagi's last supper. Is it the reason why she invited me as a courtesy? I felt it funny and started chuckling. If that was the case, then I should not have declined it.

The sense of the upcoming meal possibly being my last supper was an everyday occurrence for us. In reality, all the people should get the feeling, but they just forget that for some reason. *Or, is it a matter of probability?* Kai might have gotten her mind occupied with the fifty-fifty ratio I had mentioned to her. That very thought made me snigger a little more.

I want to go back to the base. I thought to some extent.

I did not have any intimate relationship with anyone. Still, I had familiar colleagues there. I was reminded of the face of the elderly woman in the cafeteria. *I miss them.*

“Kusanagi.” I heard a voice from behind.

I looked back.

“I don’t believe it, eh?” Sasakura was entering the room. “I am here, due to an urgent business trip. This is a commercial airfield. They’ve got to be kidding me. In such a place without decent facility ...”

I stood up, rushed to him, and made a hug.

“Come on.” Sasakura stepped back. “Hey, stop doing a weird thing. People may misunderstand it. What has happened to you?”

“Oh, sorry.” I released him at once. “I have not expected you to visit here.”

“You know, I am here not because I want to do so. It is an order from the top brass.”

“Wow, you have come here for my aircraft?”

“That’s what it seems.”

“Here comes the savior.” I think I laughed at that moment.

“How unusual. Are you that much glad to see me?”

“Yeah.” I nodded honestly. Then, I brought my face to his.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Guess what? Listen.”

“What’s that?”

I whispered into Sasakura’s ear.

“I will duel against the Teacher tomorrow.”

“Huh?” Sasakura stared at me with a surprised look. “Really?”

I nodded. My mouth was attempting to smile. I could not conceal my good feeling.

However, for some reason, Sasakura was not smiling.

He looked downward once and appeared to be looking at my shoes. Influenced by his action, I took a look at my shoes as well. Those were the same sneakers that I always wore. Sasakura raised his head and stared fixedly at me with a serious look. Then, he nodded without words.

“I’m counting on you.” I spoke with a bright tone of my voice. “You know, they seem to be tampering with the needle valve. They told me that they were intending to change the mixture ratio. We would not be able to know if we actually need the adjustment, unless we actually let the engine run. Am I wrong about that?”

“Alright.” He answered in a low voice. It was a soundless voice that consisted only of his breath.

“Oh, by the way. If you have free time, why don’t we have a dinner together?” I came up with the idea, and decided to invite him. The rarity of what I was doing was to the highest degree. Thanks to the friend who appeared in front of me suddenly, I was probably getting excited.

“Well ...” Sasakura nodded. “Thanks, but I do not have time to enjoy dinner with you. I am checking the engine right away.”

“Oh, right. You are making a point ...”

“Sorry.”

“Then, I will bring something for you here. Something to eat. Let’s have it here.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. He was not smiling at all. His face was looking as if he was

getting angry.

“What would you like to eat?”

“Anything will do.”

I asked him no more.

After that, I continued to look at his face for about three seconds. Sasakura stared fixedly at me, and then took his eyes off.

“I am counting on you.” I told him.

“Leave it to me.” Sasakura looked back at the door and smiled. At the moment, he finally showed his white teeth, and I felt relieved.

Sasakura got out of the office from the door.

As I put on a jacket and left the room, I found the two mechanics and Sasakura talking in front of my aircraft. While seeing it sideways, I got out of the tent. I was trying to decide which way to go, the lobby in the airport or the back gate. If I went to the lobby, I would probably find fast-food restaurants. But, the foods were likely to be mundane. I had a plenty of time, so I had decided to walk toward the back gate to find other candidates for getting the food. The sky was murky and cloudy like milk as usual. I saw a slightly bright area only in the western sky.

I peeped through a window of the guardhouse by the back gate. A man inside noticed me, got outside in haste, and tried to open the gate.

“I would like to ask you something. Do you happen to know any place within this vicinity at which I can buy takeout delicious foods that I can bring in here?”

The guard looked at the coworker in the shack.

“You mean bento lunchboxes? Ma’am, what type of food are you looking for?” The guard, whose face was stuck out of the window, asked.

“Anything is okay.”

They told me two restaurant locations. They seemed to go the places quite frequently. They said I could call the restaurants and order the delivery. But I wanted to make up my mind about what to choose at the actual locations. I felt like walking, and I decided to visit the restaurants.

“Take care, ma’am.” The guard, who was standing outside the shack, said and bowed to me.

I went through the gate, crossed the roadway, and walked for a while, when I was spoken to by someone. I looked back. A door of a station wagon opened, and a familiar-looking man was getting out.

“Ma’am, where to?” He asked. He was looking flurried.

He was the man whom I had met at the rooftop of the hospital. The reporter who had asked me questions at the press conference. I could not remember whether he belonged to a TV station or a newspaper company.

“I’m going out for buying something.”

“Well, ma’am.” He got himself very close, right beside me. “May I accompany you? I mean, you should not walk alone because this vicinity is not so safe.”

“If you do not take my pictures.” I said, while looking at another man in the vehicle.

“I promise, ma’am.” The man nodded. “You can trust us.”

I could do nothing but walk with the man. He was wearing a brown blazer and his hair was short. He was thrusting both hands into the pockets. He might be using a voice recorder.

“What plan do you have in your mind?” He asked.

“I have no idea.”

“I will have this off the record. So, please tell us the truth. We know the outline.”

“What do you know?”

“Rumor has it that there will be a dogfight tomorrow.”

“Dogfight?”

“Correct ... TV stations are now getting prepared for shooting the scene. We are guessing that First Lieutenant Kusanagi is here for that. Am I wrong? Will enemy aircrafts come all the way to this location?”

“I’m not sure ...” While walking, I looked at him. “But if enemies actually come here, aren’t people taking it so matter-of-factly? Do you all not have to evacuate?”

“It is expected to be of small scale, isn’t it?”

“I do not know anything.”

“Compared to a terrorist attack, it would be far more relaxing.”

“Relaxing?”

“Oh, I am just speaking on behalf of the citizens. If it sounded rude, I apologize. But, it is looking like a show. What is your opinion about situation that you are in?”

“At least for myself, it will not be a show.”

“Sure, of course, we understand that. You fly while risking your life, so we do not have any intention to deny your stance, ma’am. On the other hand, unfortunately, I’m afraid that you are surely being used for political matters that are designed for misleading people. By the way, this is my personal opinion. However, I would like you listen to me.”

“I would rather not listen.” I commented a little jokingly.

“First Lieutenant Kusanagi, this is a serious issue. Could you please listen to what I want to tell you? Only a few selected ones engage in combat, and they are being used as the political vent for the people. The current peacetime is established on it. One time, the energy for the backlash against war is congregated into one point. Moreover, it exists outside the political frameworks. Smart trick, eh? At the same time, by making people empathize with the fighters, they can restrain the people’s motive for the antisocial destructive terrorism. I do not know who originally invented this system. In short, they minimize wars, which have been conducted in any civilizations since the ancient times, and scoop up the merits generated from the wars. The key point in the system is, as you know, the beings known as the Kildren.”

I kept on walking without words. I did not want to hear such a theory. Still, I did not think of turning him away. Because I was vaguely beginning to understand that this man at least was trying to work hard and be honest. *What is he going to get by talking to me about such a matter? Although he knows it is futile, he is trying to tell me something. Doesn’t that part of what he is doing deserve being praised?* That was how I thought of him. Maybe, my mind was tranquil enough to think so. Because of the grand stage of the dogfight scheduled to take place tomorrow, my mind was getting

obtuse for this kind of matter. So, I could get mysteriously calm enough to observe him.

“If those who are fighting were humans, just like the people in general, then those who are responsible for staging the air duel would have been grilled with criticism. Then, at the very precise moment, the chosen ones have appeared out of nowhere, coincidentally. Humans that do not age. Humans that do not die.”

“That’s not true.” I interrupted, in a gentle and mild manner. I might have been able to smile for him. I had enough leeway in my mind to afford to think so. “They also die. Not a few of them have already deceased.”

“Right, but the majority of people in the society has the impression similar to that. Of course, I do not think that way. They are the same humans, even if they may belong to any species or be in any condition. But, let me emphasize the facts that pure-hearted people like you, like all of you, are made use of by the politics and are being taken advantage of for the sake of the corporate benefits, and then, precious lives are being lost easily. Someone has to speak up. This is not right. This is insane.” He shook his head. “There are many of those who think that way. But, no one can speak up and insist that. The political pressure, which is pushed to the limit of becoming the authoritative news media control, surely exists in reality. Yet, the general public is not deceived. They are just intoxicated with the war which they can watch with the sense of security and which they do not have to shed their own blood over. Whichever side wins, they won’t be affected. As if they were enjoying a sporting event, they spectate the war, the win-loss outcome of which would not affect the spectators. There is no playing field, and, of course, they are not broadcast in minute details on TV. Only some of them are revealed as highlight footages. People just sometimes frown and are just reminded that the war still continues somewhere in the world. The ongoing situation is definitely along the line of that overlook. It is their political demonstration, with which the ones behind the scene intend to make people feel the familiarity with the war. Definitely, it is a political grandstanding that is catered for the upcoming general election. It is way too obvious. You do understand this much at least, don’t you? What do you think about it? Oh, I am not asking for your comment. I am not talking with you from such a point of view anymore. When I first met you at the hospital, I made up my mind. It is not that I want to write an article about you.”

He pulled out his hands from the pockets. His right hand was holding a small voice recorder. He spread the hand to show it to me and then threw it away backward. I stopped. The voice recorder fell on the asphalt surface, bounced, and rolled. The lid came off and an audio cassette popped out of it. The sight reminded me of Higasawa's Sanka going down.

I looked at him. He seemed to be getting agitated. He appeared to be getting hotheaded, as he kept on talking.

I was just waiting for him to do something, without changing the expression. One of the restaurants had to be getting quite close. I surveyed the direction just once, then I looked at the wristwatch.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." He apologized. Then, he made a sigh as if he was taking a deep breath. "I might have gone too far ... But ..."

I nodded without words and resumed the walking.

The man was still following me, but stopped speaking. He must have noticed that there was no use talking to me.

I found a pizzeria. A flashy signboard was flickering. I entered the restaurant and ordered at the counter. The variety of available dishes was not so wide. I ordered a pizza, with a salad and a drink together. About three groups of customers were in the space. The restaurant extended far toward the backside more than I had expected, and it was spacious. While waiting, I sat on a bench beside the entrance door and started smoking. The reporter was standing very close to me. I occasionally looked up at his face, and he looked back at me while nodding.

"You may speak." I gave him permission for him. "It is easy for me just to hear you."

"No, ma'am. I have already spoken what I wanted to insist." He showed a twitched smile.

"Then, is there anything else for you to do here?" While exhaling the smoke, I asked.

"I'm your bodyguard." He answered with his arms wide open.

I see. It is what he means. I felt his self-consciousness was mysterious, but I had no

right to meddle in his affairs.

I looked outside. The alley was dark. Surely, I could recognize the slight air of danger. *But if it is really dangerous, then the level of safety would have hardly changed even if I am accompanied by him. I don't have a gun. I wonder if he has one.*

The pizza was ready in ten minutes. I asked the clerk to put it in a box and a plastic bag. I got out of the pizzeria with it. He said he would carry it, but I did not hand it to him.

We walked without words for a while.

I saw few automobiles in the vicinity.

I heard only the sound of airplanes at times.

Beside that, the vicinity was very tranquil.

“Ma’am, I imagine that aviating an aircraft is enjoyable.” He uttered.

“Have you ever gotten on aircrafts?”

“I have, but only passenger airplanes. I guess the experience would be completely different. I was not born for airplanes. Even when I get on a roller coaster, I end up feeling dizzy and could not take it.”

“It is not so terrible like that.” I pretended to smile. “Getting on a roller coaster is much worse. I have experienced it only once, and I could not stand it.”

“Oh, is that how it goes for you?”

“Absolutely. Roller coasters can do such wild things, because they are on rails. Aircrafts do not have the rails. They are in physical contact with nothing. None but air is around them. Unnatural acceleration would not be generated. It is as if they are surrounded with atmospheric cushions.”

“Well ...” He nodded. “Then, I will let someone fly me. Acrobatic aircrafts may be better.”

“Sure.”

“It would be fun.”

“I think it is.”

Although it was the same path as we walked on the way to the pizzeria, we were talking about the topic that was on the opposite end of the spectrum, compared to the heated discharge of his opinion on the way to the pizzeria. The same persons were walking on the same road, had the same minds, and probably had the same things to tell the other and to insist. Still, the tone of the speech had changed by that much. *This is really mysterious*, I thought.

We got back to the place where their station wagon was being parked. I expected him to get into the vehicle, but he passed by it. His companion seemed to still be staying inside the car.

“How far do you intend to follow me?”

“Up to the gate over there.”

“You may be dismissed here.”

“Really.”

“Thank you.” I lowered my head.

“Oh, about what?”

“Bodyguard.”

“Oh ...” He sniggered wryly. Then, he gradually erased his smile and started staring fixedly at me. “First Lieutenant Kusanagi, well ..., will we meet again?”

“I’m not sure.” I shook my head.

“If you want to talk to me about something, call me at any time.” He picked up his business card from the pocket. I received it. Apparently, his name was Somanaka. He had already offered the business card on the previous occasion, but it was then put into Kai’s pocket and I had not been given the information written on it.

“I may not get into the mood for talking.” I said.

“I will wait forever. If you have some doubts about the system surrounding you, or if you are enraged by such things someday in the future, I would like you to call me. Whatever cannot be done with the power of an individual, probably, perhaps, it may get a chance to be fulfilled.”

What is he talking about? I contemplated it.

Is he expecting me to be a whistle-blower to vent my anger by utilizing the mass media?
Unfortunately, I could not imagine the development of such a situation.

He bowed to me. *He might be a good person, after all.* I thought so, and parted with him while waving my hand. I asked the guards to open the gate, thanked them, and walked alone on a dark path toward the tent.

Under normal circumstances, I would not have walked with such type of man. I would not have heard his opinion. But I could somehow accept it, probably because I was in a stable condition. *Is it from my feeling so fortunate that I will get the chance to duel against the Teacher tomorrow? Or is it from a sense of relief that Sasakura has come to this place for me? Either way, I am in good condition tonight.* The condition was fine as a human. Although I did not think this condition would continue forever, I thought such a state might be defined as gentle. The elderly woman at the cafeteria in the airbase was the gentlest person among those whom I had known. *People may become gentler, as they age.* I might be wrong. That is what I do not know. Either way would be fine. *I just can see everything beautifully now. Everything exists beautifully around me. That's what I mean.*

If I die tomorrow, I will be very happy, I thought.

I could not see the runway, but a passenger airplane was landing gently and beautifully, while brightening its glittering lights near the approach phase with the roaring sound of four engines.

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At the office in the tent, I ate the pizza. I intended to have it with Sasakura, but he was so absorbed in adjusting the engine to the extent that he just plainly said, "Put it there." Although I set aside his share, he did not take it while I was observing his work. I knew that he had such a warped disposition.

Shall I get back to the hotel, take a shower, and sleep in the bed? Or, will I stay here, very close to my aircraft, and sleep on a sofa? I should make my decision, and choose one. I was contemplating it endlessly while smoking.

Taking a taxi to make a round trip between the hotel and this office would be

such a nuisance. However, I could take a shower there. On the other hand, if I stayed at the office in the tent, then I could perhaps get the chance to sleep in the cockpit, at the price of having to deal with the lack of shower. I was hesitant to get into the cockpit at that moment, because unfamiliar mechanics were still working. But, they would leave soon. After Sasakura was the only mechanic left there, I could do that. In the office, I found a blanket, which would more than suffice for sleeping in the cockpit with.

I had a half-finished book. When I flipped through the book on a sofa, the door was opened and Kai entered.

“Have you had a meal?” After asking so, Kai saw the remaining pizza, salad, and soda left on the table. “It appears that you are done with the meal.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I got my legs down and sat straight.

“Are you not going back to the hotel?”

“I have not decided yet.”

“How is your condition?”

“Very good.”

“Can I have a minute with you?” Kai asked.

“Sure, of course.”

She sat on the sofa opposite me. As always, she crossed her legs, picked up a cigarette, and lit it in a graceful manner.

“There is a chance that it won’t be held tomorrow.” After exhaling the smoke, Kai spoke.

“Sorry?” I inclined my head. I could not understand what she was saying. “What do you mean, ma’am?”

“Weather.” Kai answered. She exhaled a thin streak of smoke again. “If it rains, it will be postponed.”

“Why?”

“The world below the clouds is like that.”

“Do I have to stay below the clouds?”

“Haven’t you read the project protocol document?”

“I have. But, once the duel begins, I will not have time for caring about the coordinate.”

“If you won’t, perhaps the opponent will.”

“Why do you say so?”

“You know, the aircraft on the other side may turn out to be more suitable for the lower altitude.”

“That is not likely to be the case.”

“The spectators will have hard times trying to watch the dogfight, if it rains.”

Finally, I was beginning to understand the situation. What the reporter named Somanaka had talked about came up in my mind.

“Is it what you mean, ma’am?”

“It is not what you have to worry about. You also prefer the dogfight in the fine weather to that in the rain, right?”

“Definitely.”

“If so, that wouldn’t be a problem for you. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded. I just disliked the situation in which the duel would not be conducted on the next day as planned and postponed to the day after that.

“How is your aircraft?” Kai asked me another question.

“Oh, are you the one who summoned Sasakura for me?” I raised my head.

“Thank you so much.”

“I will do anything that I can do for you. I mean ...” Kai squinted and raised her chin. It was a face filled with confidence. “I am betting, investing, and counting on Suito Kusanagi.”

Episode 4: Low Pass “By the way, how is death? Where is it?”

He was looking for the accustomed fear of death since long time ago, but could not find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear at all, because there was no death.

Instead of death, there was light.

“So, that’s it!” He said aloud suddenly. “What joy!”

This excerpt is from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* originally written in Russian by Leo Tolstoy.

-1-

On the following day, the weather was gloomy with drizzling rain. Clouds looked heavy as if a lot of slugs were gathering in the sky and they were swirling viscously. I had not seen such a sky very often. I wondered if it was because I had hardly looked up at the sky on cloudy or rainy days when I had been at a base. *Or, is it the particular sky that only appears in a city?*

At around 08:00 in the morning, I was officially informed that the operation had been postponed until tomorrow or later. So, I decided to go back to the hotel once. I asked someone to call a taxi, which arrived at the front of the tent to pick me up. While sitting in the rear seat, I fell asleep before I realized it. I was woken up, when the taxi arrived at the hotel.

I thought I would take a shower first and smoke after that. But once I entered the room, I got myself in the bed and fell asleep. When I woke up, it was around noon. As if the air within my body were let out, I was feeling loose without any tension inside me. I was even suspecting that about half of my cells were dead. If I tried to read a book, my brain would not recognize the letters. Although I was watching the news on TV, most of them were surprisingly distant topics from my point of view. It was not a distance in a physical sense. For example, if they were talking about the moon, I would have understood it. The moon was physically distant, but mentally close.

I did not feel hungry. At about noon, I got a phone call. I thought it was from Kai, and picked up the receiver.

“Yes, this is Kusanagi.”

“Oh, hey, it’s me. Sasakura. How’re you doing?”

“Nothing in particular ...” I replied. “So? What’s up?”

“Although it is a makeshift, the engine is ready to go. Do you happen to be interested in doing a test flight?”

“On the ground?”

“No. It would not work well unless you reach the sky.”

“But can we be permitted to do so?”

“I talked to the one named Kai. She said she could manage and take care of it.”

“Alright, I will be there right away.”

I got dressed and rushed out of my room. While waiting for the elevator to come, I uttered, “Yes,” no less than three times.

I got on a taxi in front of the hotel and went back to the airfield. I was leaning forward and watching the direction the taxi was heading for.

“Not this way. Head for the back entrance. It is to the left here, I think.”

“Ma’am, is there a back entrance ...?” When we were waiting for the traffic light to turn green, the driver looked back at me with a wondering look. “Are we allowed to get in from there ...?”

“I doubt that civilians can.” I answered. Then, I noticed that I was not a part of the general public, and felt funny.

A guard opened the gate, and gave the driver the direction for the interior of the facility. The taxi stopped in front of the tent, and I paid the fare.

“Ma’am, what on earth is this stuff?” The driver asked me while looing at the tent.

“Well, I’m not sure.” I lied. While putting on a feigned smile, I received the change.

I got off the vehicle. After the taxi was out of my sight, I entered the tent.

Sasakura was sitting on the steps in front of the door of the office and wiping his tool with waste cloth. It was his custom to do so after he was done with his work. No one was around the vicinity.

“Got permission?” I was walking toward Sasakura.

“Not yet.” Sasakura shook his head. “But, I think we will. I guess they are making arrangements for clearing the runway.”

“They need not do that, though. If we cannot use the runway, the road in the front will just do. Easier than taking off from an aircraft carrier.”

“That’s impossible. I mean, there is no wind.”

Sasakura was right about it. Still, it would not be difficult for me to take off during the niche of time between the takeoffs of the passenger aircrafts. I understood that they would have to enforce certain regulations. *For example, more than two aircrafts must not be in line of the runway. Or, time intervals of at least a few minutes are required between the procedures of takeoffs and landings.*

“Have you changed the mixture ratio?” I asked.

“I have.” Sasakura answered. “So, you should do a test flight.”

“Okay.”

“Considering the fact that it is raining today, the feeling that you experience would be different from that on a sunny day. I’m not talking about matters above the clouds. There is no way for us to understand how it works, unless you try at a lower altitude.”

“I wonder if I can fly at a lower altitude.”

“Above the lake is the only option.”

“Lake ...” I had noticed that it was close by just by reading the map, and I was yet to see the actual lake. When I flew in to this place, I came from the other side. So, I might have only seen something like that in the distance vaguely. I thought that the air would never be clear in and around this city.

“In addition, I made it lighter by about 35 kilograms.”

“Oh? What did you take away?”

“This and that.”

“For example, which part?”

“Never mind that. It became lighter. You don’t have anything to complain about, do you?”

“Actually, I do because you cannot possibly reduce its weight by as much as 35 kilograms.” I might have been speaking faster than usual. “If you have taken away parts, you’d better tell me about them. Or else, I wouldn’t be able to fly due to the fear.”

“Cannot fly due to the fear, you say?” Sasakura was laughing while showing his white teeth. “Of all people, you, Kusanagi, are telling me that you cannot fly due to the fear?”

“Hey, do not tease me.” I stepped toward him. “Which part?”

“The biggest ones I changed were tires.”

“Tires?” I looked back at the aircraft.

“I replaced them with smaller and thinner ones.” Sasakura explained. “So, you have to come back to this place without fail. If you make an emergency landing on a public road, you will end up breaking the landing gears.”

I moved to the space under the wing of the aircraft. I looked at the landing gears. As he said, new small tires were attached to them. They looked fragile.

“Just by replacing them, I could make it lighter by nearly 10 kilograms. Then, I also replaced the absorbers of the landing gears with smaller ones. Their specifications are designed just for this particular runway.”

“And then? How did you manage to reduce the weight of the remaining 25 kilograms?”

“Oxygen supplier and heater.” Sasakura said.

“What?”

“I removed them.”

“How come?”

“You need not fly higher in the sky.”

“Ridiculous!” I shouted.

“I mean, this modification is only for the event that will take place tomorrow.”

“No. That’s not reasonable.”

“This is reasonable.”

“Definitely not. That’s a wrong thing to do.”

“The lighter it gets, the more you can take advantage of the condition. In the first place, the pusher configuration is the handicap that you have to deal with. When it comes down to the attitude control at the lower altitude, the aircraft of your opponent has the upper hand, frankly speaking.”

“I don’t believe that.” I disagreed.

“When it comes down to the dogfight within a close range, the data have proved that.”

“Even if that is true ...” I wanted to protest and looked for proper words.

“Don’t worry. I am not telling you that you cannot win. Your opponent has the advantage in the power of the aircraft, along with the turning performance and stalling control. Even so, your Sanka is lighter.”

“It is designed to be light to start with.”

“About the acceleration while flying horizontally at low speed, our aircraft has the slight advantage over theirs. While ascending, ours can overwhelm theirs, obviously.”

“That’s right. That’s why I go up higher.”

“The radius of the loop maneuver is small as well. This will be your advantage, when you move vertically with obstacles on both sides of you.”

“Obstacles on both sides of me?”

“You know. I mean buildings.”

“Shall I fly at such a low altitude? That’s ridiculous.”

“Listen, Kusanagi.” Sasakura said. “Your opponent will try to bring the dogfight

to the lower altitude. He thinks our Sanka wants to fly higher. Because of the premise, I believe he will definitely expect so while making a split-second decision. So, contrary to that, you should position yourself below him. You should fly low. I mean, by making use of obstacles.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I increased the maximum flap angle by more than 30 percent. It took me three hours to grind the interfering parts that were getting on the way. Now it enables the braking maneuver to work well. Use them with the ailerons. Because of the lighter weight, it can decelerate more quickly. I think this advantage is substantial.”

I was listening without saying words. I tried to focus on Sasakura’s explanation. What he was saying might be correct.

“Listen to the engine sound carefully. Whether the sound is dry or wet, you need to recognize it. At the lower altitude, it will probably sound wet. Because its oxygen density is high. Even though the air in a city is polluted, it still contains more oxygen than air above the clouds. You need to adjust the needle valve. It is beyond the usual range of your assignment, though.”

“No, I did it in a military exercise on an aircraft carrier. It was when I took off with the maximum thrust.”

“Ah, yes. Same as that.”

“Got it.”

“Choke it, okay?”

“Of course, I will.”

“I want to make the final adjustment after you conduct a test flight once. Currently, I am setting the values for the tuning randomly just with my feelings. Today’s weather is the blessed rain for Sanka. If I complete the adjustment, then I can bring the performances of the aircrafts closer to being even.”

“That will be nice.” I nodded.

“As for the estimated time span for your ability to stay above the clouds ... Maybe, five minutes or so.”

“Would it be hard for me to breathe?”

“It’s gonna get cold.”

“Ah, I remember. In the past, the heater once stopped working. Like that time ... I never want to experience that again.”

I heard the sound of a car making a stop, and then Kai entered the tent after a short while.

“Ma’am, am I permitted to fly?” I asked her immediately.

Kai nodded. Then, she looked at her wristwatch.

“In 30 minutes.”

“Roger.” I nodded.

As if my blood started circulating through my whole body in an instant, a warm feeling reached the tips of my fingers. On the other hand, the surface of my skin was getting dry quickly, and I was getting prepared for entering the mode to synchronize myself with the machine.

“Where are other mechanics?” Kai asked Sasakura. I guessed that they would need manpower to pull the aircraft out to the airfield.

“They are having lunch. I think they’ll be back soon.” Sasakura answered.

I got on the wing and looked inside the cockpit to examine it minutely.

“Be careful.” Kai approached and looked up toward me. “Do not go too far. Have you heard from Sasakura about the modification he made?”

“Yes, ma’am. Certainly.”

“Here.” She took a thin file folder out of the binder she was holding, and handed it to me. It looked like a map. “Fly above the lake. Is that understood? We will use the radio, of course. But, be careful because it may get intercepted rather easily.”

“Roger.”

-2-

As scheduled, I was ascending to the sky in 30 minutes. The runway was feeling sticky with asphalt and the brand-new tires made strange noise. But, I had already

taken off from the ground, and they were done with their role. I felt that the engine sound was a bit more sluggish than usual. I was gaining the altitude with about 60 percent of the full power, so that my aircraft would not make too much noise. While turning, I headed for the lake. I saw an expressway and a residential area. But the view was vaguely hazy as a whole. The rain was fine like mist and the windshield was wet. Still, the visibility was not as bad as I had imagined.

Above all, the joy of flying was dominating anything else.

I shook the wings to the left and right.

I pitched the nose of the aircraft a bit upward, and tested the slipping maneuver by using the rudders.

The sound of slicing the air obliquely.

The pattern of the water running down on the windshield was changing accordingly.

I made a roll slowly.

The engine was getting warmer.

Is what I see below a suburban area?

Huge stores were standing on both sides of a highway. Then, a factory. In the vicinity, there were farms and houses. Many automobiles were moving. I saw a railroad, which split the scenery with its straight line.

I was approaching the river. A road and an iron bridge of the railroad were stretching side by side. I adjusted the course to fly along the river.

There was almost no wind. As if in calming the Sanka, which tended to fly higher by nature, I kept the altitude low. The actual altitude was 550. The clouds above me were close. The rain had almost stopped by then.

“How’s your flight?” I heard Sasakura’s voice through the earphones.

“Whoa. You’ve surprised me.” I replied jokingly. I had never heard Sasakura’s voice in the sky. It was really new to me. “Nice voice.”

“Reached above the lake?”

“Almost there.”

“Ascend up to 800 once.”

“Roger.”

By pulling the control stick slightly to deflect the elevators for the upward pitching, I was entering the clouds. The scenery around me turned to white, and the visibility worsened soon. Still, the bright white clouds were beginning to appear at the higher altitude above me.

I checked the meters, and then ascended even more.

It was the particular altitude that always made me wonder if the heaven was out there.

Probably, angels are hiding themselves somewhere.

I climbed up a little more, and then my field of vision gradually opened up.

“Ok, I’m now at about 800.”

“Loosen the needle by two steps.”

“Roger.” I stretched out my hand and operated the needle valve. “Done.”

“Listen to the sound carefully.”

“Nice voice. I’m fascinated.”

“Don’t be silly. I mean the engine sound.”

I know that. What a square man.

“Usual, same old sound.” I answered. “Better than what I heard earlier.”

“So, go down to 200.”

200? How can you say that so casually?

I let my aircraft roll sideways, and deflected the elevator to pitch upward.

I was sinking into the cloud again.

As soon as the visibility of the vicinity was minimized due to the cloud, I changed the orientation of the aircraft from inverted to upright.

Although I wanted to scatter the cloud that was surrounding me with the wings, I could not get any tangible result.

As the speed was getting faster and faster, the airframe was starting to vibrate.

Before long, I was coming down to the cloudy sky near the ground.

The lake was below me. I was approaching it very fast.

I looked at the altimeter. I did not have enough courage to keep watching it.

I wonder if there can be a pilot who would believe in the meters to such extent.

I rolled to assume the inverted orientation, to the left and right, and looked around.

No one else was flying. Not even a passenger airplane. No balloon, no advertising balloon, and no bird. There was none but air that was slightly murky with vapor.

When the altitude reached 300, I decreased the angle of inclination. I made a banking move to the left and was descending while turning. The deep gray surface of the water, which was completely flat, was becoming vivid.

“Okay, I’m at 200.” I reported.

“How is it? I mean the sound.”

I was listening to the propeller sound for a short while.

“At which level is the throttle?” Sasakura asked.

“Now, it is at the medium-slow.”

“Race it more.”

“By how much?”

“To the high level.”

Although I thought it was meaningless to race it at the coordinate, I pushed up the throttle lever with my left hand. The aircraft started accelerating immediately and charged forward. I had the wings stand obliquely, stabilized the rear part with the rudders, and pitched the nose upward. If I had not done this, then I would have ended up wasting its power.

The engine did not seem to be in a good condition. It was sluggish.

“Not good. It’s sluggish.” I reported.

“Close the needle valve, step by step.”

I did as I was told.

“Choke it by one step, and fly for 20 seconds.”

“Roger.”

“If it still doesn’t work well, close it again and then fly for 20 seconds.”

When I closed the needle valve by one step, there was almost no change. I choked it by another step.

The attitude of the airframe remained the same. While having the aircraft oriented obliquely, I was flying straight.

If someone sees me, the one would think of this as a crazy aircraft.

This time the engine sound was getting a bit lighter.

“I think this is working more smoothly.”

“One more step to go.”

I had already done that. It made the revolution a little faster. After a while, it became a drier sound.

“It is working well now. I feel the revolution has gone up by about 120.”

“Close it by another step.”

I did as I was told.

The revolution increased even more. I looked back. I wanted to see the exhaust fume, but nothing could be seen. I could not do so without stalling.

“The revolution has been increased. It’s in a good condition.”

“Have the nose pitch upward.”

“You are surely demanding.”

I brought the wings back to the horizontal orientation, and had the nose point upward. Since I had already gained enough speed, I started climbing immediately. *Surely, it is light*, I felt. Decreasing the weight by 35 kilograms was effective. It also had to do with my not having a drop tank. *Or, am I having the illusion because of the thickness of air in this space?*

“How is the revolution of the engine?”

“Umm, nothing has changed in particular.”

“Alright. Then, bring the needle valve back by one step.”

“You mean, loosening it, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Roger.”

I did not understand why I had to do that. The needle valve control was linked with the throttle part of the engine. Since it is a very delicate part, pilots usually do not have anything to do with it during flight. Only in cases such as when the engine is about to stop at any moment, the pilot controls it to adjust the fuel-air mixture ratio, to enable the quick-fix improvisation to somehow keep the engine rotation going.

“Anything else?”

“I understand pretty much most of them. Keep flying for a little while, at the lowest altitude possible.”

“If I fly at a lower altitude, I will end up swimming.”

“They said that they are letting a boat stand by.”

“Really?” I was surprised.

It might have been Sasakura’s joke. However, considering the fact that he did not make any reply to my latest transmission, it seemed that he was being serious. *Does it mean that a lifeboat is ready? To be sure, I am not a fan of being in water. Lake may not be worse than sea. Still, just by imagining myself to be immersed in such water for a long time makes me shudder.*

I was flying as if I were lapping the surface of the water.

With the throttle at the medium, I executed the low-pass maneuver.

I climbed up, and then brought the throttle to the high level.

Then, I made a loop.

The condition is good.

This airspace is spacious and the visibility is excellent. Since I was getting closer to the

surface of the water, I could feel the sense of distance between the water and me. The sensation was new to me. The opportunity to execute any acrobatic maneuver at such a low altitude was quite rare. It was as if I were doing a stunt in a circus performance.

I was flying invertedly, and did the low-pass flight again.

Then, I deflected the elevator slowly to pitch the vector toward the direction my feet were pointing.

The surface of the water is now above my head.

I was gradually having the nose of the aircraft point toward the sky.

I suppressed the urge to make a roll.

The belt was pressing my body against the seat firmly. My head was being pulled.

Climbing vertically.

I put the throttle to the high level.

It's accelerating. Great!

I was experiencing a pleasant feeling.

I closed the throttle at once.

Neutral.

I started stalling immediately.

Leaning to the left. As usual. It's the tendency of this aircraft.

I am falling.

I shook its nose, and the motion stopped shortly after that.

I prepared to use the flaps. I got them out, as I was gaining the speed.

The brakes were working.

It was approximately twice as effective as usual.

I slightly opened the throttle and pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators for the upward maneuver.

I instantly adjusted the control with the rudders.

It smoothly slid out into the horizontal level.

I checked the meter. The altitude was 300.

I made a roll to the right.

Then, to the left.

I stop it, reverse the roll direction, and then stop that.

Okay.

The trim tab alignment is also good.

Very light.

Quite possibly the lightest ever.

It was similar to the Sanka I once got on in my dream.

“How are the oil pressure and the oil temperature?” Sasakura asked me.

“Everything is normal. They’re not working.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Just kidding. Oh, the oil temperature is relatively high by a little bit.”

“Alright. It’s about time for you to come back.”

I had been ordered in advance to wait at the southwestern part of the runway before landing. I made a wide turn, and headed for the coordinate.

I left the airspace above the lake, and flew above farms and the city. There were tall buildings, here and there. *Are those high-voltage power pylons the tallest of them all? Still, they do not quite reach the altitude I’m flying at.*

I reached the designated airspace, and started executing boring turning maneuvers. *I will be in trouble if I fall asleep while drawing a circle.*

I saw a large passenger airplane touching down on the runway. When I thought I was next, I was told that an airplane was about to take off. I was yet to be given the permission to land.

Where is the Teacher now? Such a thought crossed my mind.

He was in a place that was not this airfield. He would have to fly to the

coordinate from somewhere else. *I wonder how far it is. He would not be able to fly for so long. If the time being spent in the battle is shortened by as much as the time consumed in the cruise flight to get here, I would be disappointed. If we take off from the same airfield simultaneously, then the aerial duel would be fairer, with the best conditions for both sides.* I was thinking about such an impossibility.

My concept of enemies and friends seems to be different from that of ordinary folks. *Am I the only one who is different from others ...? No. I believe that every pilot would think this way.*

The reason is.

The enemy I fight against is closer to me than those on the ground.

At least, every pilot knows it. We do not hate our opponents. Contrary to that, we even respect them. Whether friends or enemies, both sides are established pilots. So, the letters of “foe”, the word of “enemy”, and the concept itself must be different fundamentally and decisively. After all, at the very point, there is the difference between those who fight and those who do not fight.

Finally, I got the permission for landing.

I deliberately approached the airfield from its side, turned the direction suddenly after putting the landing gears out, and entered the runway diagonally.

The landing procedure followed immediately after that. It was as if I were sliding into it. The tires were harder than usual. I put on the brakes and moved to the taxiway. I guessed that I did not even use just the first 10 percent of the entire runway. I can do that because I know where the hangar is.

I was required to confirm that I moved out of the runway, by issuing “Yes” for the answer. In front of the tent, Sasakura, two other mechanics, and Kai were waiting for me and my Sanka.

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After tugging the Sanka into the tent, Sasakura took a sample of the oil attached to the exhaust pipe. The other mechanics started removing the cowling. Sasakura asked me several questions. If I remembered right, all of my answers were “Yes”.

Although I had been in a good mood, I became gloomy right after the landing. I felt my body got unbearably heavier. I told Kai I wanted to take a rest at the hotel. She called a taxi and the two of us went back to the hotel together. I kept silent in the vehicle. So did Kai. *What a temperamental person I am*, I evaluated myself.

When we parted from each other at the lobby, Kai asked me what I was planning to do for the dinner that night. I shook my head and said, "I'm not sure." She smiled gently and nodded slightly. She also told me that she would call me in the evening and advised me not to go out of the hotel.

I took the elevator to go back to my own room. I entered and noticed a business card placed below the door. I picked it up. It was that of Somanaka, the reporter. On the other side, a message was written: *Call me, if you can*. I sat on the bed and called him first.

"Hello, this is Somanaka."

"It's Kusanagi."

"Oh, ma'am. Thank you ... Sorry to bother you. I apologize."

"So, what is up?"

"If possible, I would like to meet and talk with you today, even for just a bit. Is it possible?"

"I'm sorry. That's impossible today."

"Really ..."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"No, never mind. Thank you so much. I think I would contact you again. I hope we will be able to see each other next time."

"So do I, if I will still live by then."

"Pardon?"

"See you then."

I hung up the phone.

Then, I collapsed on the bed.

Why am I exhausted by this much? I had no idea about that.

Was I not flying for only tens of minutes. *Far shorter than usual. Is it because I flew at a lower altitude? Surely, it was not the place which I usually called "sky". Is that the reason?*

I lost the will to get myself undressed.

I did not remove the shoes from my feet.

I was gradually falling asleep.

I had a dream, in which I was piloting an aircraft. *I cannot take a rest this way.* I thought so in the dream. It meant that I was aware of my dreaming. However, when I became aware of the dream, I found myself getting much younger. I was still a small child. If I got myself into the cockpit, my feet would not have been able to reach the rudder pedals despite my stretching my legs. *If things go this way, I would struggle to land,* I thought. Even though I was worrying about the issue in the dream, I was not being hasty at all. I was even speaking to myself, "This is just a dream." Before long, I stopped worrying about the rudders. I sat erect with my legs folded between the seat and my buttocks, positioned myself higher on the seat, and looked outside the windshield. It would be okay, as long as I was holding the control stick.

There was nothing but the pure blue sky. I was not sure about where the sun was. As I had the wings bank to one side, I saw the pure white carpet of clouds below me.

What a simple sky it is.

No one else was flying in the sky.

"I wonder if this is my image of ideality." I uttered to myself.

That might be the case.

Since my childhood, I had often imagined what it would be like if I were the only one who was existing in the world. What if all the people except myself vanished and nothing else had changed in the cities and nature? It was a very amusing delusion. *I am craving for such a world.* It was obvious.

I can go to wherever I want to and play with whatever I want. If I visit a bookstore or a library, I can read books all day long. I think I will be able to find something I can eat. I believe I will be able to find enough food to feed myself.

I don't see any human, let alone cats and dogs.

No bird is in the sky. No fish is found in the sea anymore.

All the living creatures have vanished into the thin air.

Still, why am I the only one who has been left behind? I thought so in the middle of the imagination.

In short, I wonder. *Am I not a living creature?*

I mean ...

The definition of a living creature is that it is destined to die someday in the future.

However.

I do not feel it is a sad thing at all.

Being alone suits me more.

This option is freer.

No friction.

I notice that the situation in which there are many people around me is the most inconvenient of all.

That's right.

Freely and slowly, I will live.

Then, when I have to die, I should jump off from somewhere high. While falling, I would be able to really fly. There cannot be a bigger bliss than being able to die for no one else at my own will.

That's the end.

I should save the most amusing part for the last.

Before I noticed it, the aircraft disappeared and I was standing at the exact center of a deserted city. Roadways were full of vehicles. But none of them was moving. With my both hands stretched sideways, I was walking while twirling around. I was running lightly as if I was skating. I occasionally jumped onto the hood of a car, its roof, and then leaped from it to the adjacent automobile. I did not care about the

loud noise that I was making. I ran through an alley, climbed the ladder, which was attached to the side wall of a building, up to its rooftop. I opened various types of doors as I liked and looked inside the rooms. I even pulled a curtain, and opened the door of an oven and slammed it shut with full strength.

Everything is amusing.

There is no human anywhere.

I am the only one.

But ...

If I am alone.

I would probably not be able to get on an aircraft.

I cannot maintain it. So, I want just Sasakura to exist. If he is beside me, I might be able to fly.

Well, still ...

Even if I may be able to fly, I would be bored.

For some reason, I feel I want to encounter an opponent at least just in the sky.

If the Teacher is here ...

How fun this would be.

All these things for the sake of convenience ...

I am smiling.

I might as well start humming.

I am walking while making twirls.

On the deserted streets.

Slipping through the lines of empty vehicles.

While walking, I keep thinking.

So ...

I need nothing.

This is enough.

I alone am enough.

I do not even need the world.

I do not care if everything vanishes.

Including myself ...

I look up at the sky.

I stop walking.

What's that?

I see something moving.

I am staring at the bright sky. An advertising balloon is floating in the air.

Red.

It is moving with wind.

Who put it in the air ...?

I wonder if it has long been in the sky.

In the next moment, I am standing on the rooftop.

The rope of the advertising balloon is fastened to a huge concrete block. Beside three helium gas cylinders is a colorful tent. Go-carts for little kids. A locomotive with a short railroad track. A shiny helicopter is drawing a circle in the air. A red biplane with machine guns. A small merry-go-round is rotating. The light is on. I am walking toward it.

I see a castle-like building beyond the merry-go-round. It is a fake, toy castle designed with smooth curves. Its main gate is open. It is an arch-shaped entrance.

One person is standing inside the gate.

It must be a doll. I think so, as I am approaching it.

The entrance is like a dark tunnel.

The one standing beyond it is he.

“Kannami?”

He smiles and nods.

“Why are you here?”

“I’ve been waiting for you, Suito Kusanagi.”

“Why have you not disappeared? All the living creatures except me have vanished.”

“It is because this place is in your dream.”

“So, that’s it.” I nod. “It’s a dream. In my dream. Even so, why are you here?”

“It’s simple.”

“Simple?”

I take his hand.

A cold hand.

Like a doll’s hand.

Like mine.

I bring my body close to his.

I let my face get closer to his.

To touch him.

To feel him.

“Why?”

“Why do you not understand it?”

“I have no idea.”

“All the creatures except you have surely vanished.” He says.

“But, you are here.”

“Why do you not notice it?”

“Notice what?”

“You just pretend not to notice it. You know the reason, of course.”

“Do I? I don’t understand. What do you mean? The reason?”

The boy hugs me.

Tightly.

Then, he kisses on my neck.

He whispers in my ear.

Only a moment before I hear the word, I have just realized it.

I see.

That's it.

Then, the chill runs down my spine.

“I am not ‘except you’.” He says.

-4-

I woke up.

On the bed.

My pulse was faster than usual.

I was thirsty.

With the sense of impatience that I could not do anything about.

It was explosive. It was too late for me to do anything about it. Without a break, it was resounding.

Beads of sweat stood out on my entire body.

What is this?

What on earth is happening?

For a short while ...

I could not remember when it was and where I was.

Rather.

I had to think about who I was.

Slowly, I started groping.

I looked at my hands and my legs, and then put my hands on my face.

I wonder who I am.

I wanted to ask about it aloud.

But, if I do not even know the voice, it would be terrible.

I touched my head and combed my hair backward.

I put the legs down from the bed and stood up. I felt my body was light. No pain. If I remembered right, certain parts of my body might have gotten hurt. I put my hand on the back of the neck. An adhesive plaster was applied there.

I'm relieved.

At least this is my body that I have known.

After taking off the jacket, I walked to the bathroom. I looked at myself into the mirror.

A pale face.

With her frowned face, she was wearing a difficult expression.

This is me. Really?

I turned the faucet on, and water started running down. I put my hands into the current.

Cold.

I brought those wet hands close to my face.

I scooped up the water with both hands and put it in my mouth.

I spat it out. The water smelt like a disinfectant.

I looked at the side of the washbasin. A razor blade was in a vinyl bag.

A pure white towel.

A toothbrush and a plastic cup.

A bar of soap.

What are they all doing?

I took the razor.

It reminded me that I once cut my wrist with a razor blade.

I looked at the wrist. I recognized the scar. It still remained there. Since it had not disappeared yet, I could recall it. As soon as I recalled the memory, I could remember, be reminded, and recognize that it was my own matter and about my own body.

The proof for that.

Before I realized it, my front hair was getting long enough to caress my eyes. Although it was giving me no problem at that point, I was suspecting that it would bother me when I wore a cap.

I am cutting it.

I took the razor out of the vinyl bag.

The water was running.

Steam was rising from it.

It seemed to have become hot water.

Odd water.

Flattering water.

I held the razor between the fingers of my right hand, and cut the front hair little by little, while looking into the mirror.

The doorbell rang.

Someone has come. Why does the one know I am here?

As I am using the razor, I might be scolded.

What shall I do?

But, I have already cut the vinyl open, which is a smoking gun.

Anyway, I should respond.

I walked to the door and unlocked it. The door chain was not fastened.

“Hello.” A woman standing there greeted. “What’s going on?”

“Sorry?”

“You are looking surprised.”

I tilted my head to one side.

“Are you not feeling too well?”

That may be the case.

I closed my eyes.

I felt as if my body were floating, and sensed my back touching something. I was bumping into a wall. It was because my body just fell down backward.

“Kusanagi, are you okay?” A woman’s voice.

“Oh, umm ..., I’m okay.”

Then.

I managed to walk by myself to the back of the room.

I was sitting on the bed.

The bed was white.

It was so white that it looked as if it was waiting to suck blood.

“You should lie down there.” She suggested.

I too thought so, and lay down on the bed. I buried my face into the pillow. Then, I started thinking for a while.

I was barely able to recall the name of the woman who entered my room. *So, she’s Kai. My supervisor. Now is the evening. The very important flight is scheduled for tomorrow. I am Suito Kusanagi.*

“I’m relieved.” I whispered while keeping my eyes closed.

“What’s the matter?” She asked. Her voice was near.

I’m not sure.

Anyway, I’m relieved.

I’m relieved because I still am what I have been.

I have not gone anywhere else.

I have not been reincarnated in someone else’s body.

Today is still today.

I'm glad because today is waiting for me.

Tears welled up in my eyes and trickled down.

“Kusanagi, are you okay? Feeling bad? Want me to call a doctor?”

“I’m okay, ma’am.” I raised my head. Then, I slowly got up and sat at an edge of the bed. I straightened my back and put my hands on my knees. I recognized that my tears remained on my cheeks, but I had no intention of hiding them. I was not sure of why I was crying. But, I did not think it was a bad situation for me.

Kai was looking at me without saying anything.

Silence.

The window behind her was reflecting the view inside the room.

“You’re crying.” Kai said, while holding out her hand.

If I kept silent, she might have touched and hugged me. I predicted that she was about to stand up and do so.

“Ma’am, you know, I think I’m crying for joy.” I answered. “I had a dream.”

“Dream?” Kai straightened up and leaned her head sideways. “Was it a pleasant dream?”

“Yes.”

“If so, that’s a good thing, I guess ...”

“You don’t need to worry, ma’am. I mean, I myself do not worry.” I tried to chuckle. *I wonder if it is working well.*

“I have come here to ask you if I can invite you for dinner ... Is it okay for you?”

“Let me see ...” I took a deep breath. “Yes, ma’am. I accept the invitation.”

“I’m happy to hear that. So, I will wait at the corridor.” Kai stood up and walked toward the door.

After she got out of the room, I washed my face in the bathroom. The razor was still left beside the faucet. I did not want to touch it anymore. *If I do, I might get hurt.*

I put on a jacket and took a deep breath. I approached the window and brought my face close to it. When it was close enough for me to the extent that I could no

longer see the reflection of my face, I could finally see outside.

A dark sky.

I wonder if it is raining. But, the window was not wet.

It was as if I were looking into a fish tank.

How would aircrafts fly in such a space, I thought.

I was reminded of fish swimming in an aquarium. Although I did not remember exactly when it was, I had been to an aquarium just once in my childhood. Schools of fish were swimming there. They were swimming with their mouths open. They were probably thinking that the place was their whole world. *No storm, no enemy, enough fish feed. Calm and peaceful. It must be comfortable for them. No inconvenience.* However, I doubted that it was what they wanted.

Human beings live in a fish tank named society, clinging to safety and peace. If they were born and grew up in the water tank, how could they imagine the world outside?

Yes, they can.

Isn't their ability to comprehend such matters what makes them the humankind?

Since the childhood, every human being has known what is outside. They feel the true freedom.

It is the reason why there are those who take off for the sky.

Every child has a dream of flying in the sky.

Until they learn to actually fly.

If not.

Until they give up on flying.

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We took an elevator to the upper floor and entered a restaurant. It was the first time for me to visit the place. I wondered why the place for having a dinner was so dark. A flame of a candle was flickering delicately on a small table. The wall was

made of antique wood, which was covered with ivy-like artificial plants. I touched it and made sure that it was made of plastic. I thought that about half of human beings would be made of these materials in a not so distant future just by touching them like that.

When a waiter came to the table to take our orders, I asked him to reduce the amount of dishes as much as possible.

“Certainly, ma’am. We’ll serve you in relatively smaller portions.”

“Not just relatively smaller. Less than half the regular amount, please.” I made the reminder.

After the waiter left us, Kai brought her amused face closer to mine.

“I think you can leave some parts of the dishes.”

“Yes, ma’am. But ... I would feel sick just by looking at the large amount.”

“I see.” She smiled. “You are so stoic.”

Although I did not understand why I was so stoic according to her, I nodded anyway. Kai picked up a pack of cigarettes and offered it to me. I politely declined it. She held one in her mouth and lit it.

“They say the weather will improve after tonight.” She exhaled smoke, and said. The aroma of cigarette hung over around our table.

“Really.” I took a breath. Because I loved the smell of cigarette. “So, it will take place tomorrow, I suppose.”

“Do you want to psych yourself up to win? Or, do you prefer to relax?”

“I’m not sure.” I shook my head. “Which version of me do you think I am now, ma’am?”

“Well, I have no idea.” Kai was staring at me. “You do not look psyched up. Still, you are far from being relaxed. Is that right?”

“You know, that’s the way I usually am.”

“Usually, you fly for a while after you get on an aircraft, right? In that case, you will get your spirit uplifted gradually while flying. However, as for tomorrow, you have to fight immediately after taking off. The opponent will fly from a distant

place, whereas you are the one who intercepts the other. There would be no time for you to get warmed up.”

“No worries, ma’am. I will warm up my engine in advance.”

Our drinks were being served. The waiter set the glasses and poured wine into Kai’s. I sipped sparkling water. I sensed the liquid sinking deep into my body. Then, I recalled what I tried to do to my front hair and touched it with my fingers.

“What’s wrong?” Kai asked.

“I was in the process of cutting the front hair.”

“How do you usually deal with your hair?”

“How?”

“I mean, where do you have your hair cut? Is there such a place near the airbase?”

“I cut it myself.”

“Oh ...” While holding the glass in her hand, Kai curved her lips. “I guess that is the case for you ... I have been wanting to ask you the question. Did you use to have such a hairdo, before getting the current occupation?”

“Yes.”

“Did you play any sports?”

“No, nothing.”

“Do you always cut your hair by yourself?”

“When I was a child, my mother did it. I learned to do it, after I was given my own scissors.”

“You mean, the scissors to cut your hair?”

“No, ma’am. I was given a stationery set, with a pair of scissors in it, when I entered an elementary school. So, I cut my hair with them occasionally.

“Really ...” Kai widened her eyes.

“I often wondered why my hair got so long.” I spoke in a little funny way. “I felt the same for my nails. They are so unnecessary.”

“But, I guess there were girls who kept their hair long. They might have braided

or decorated their hair with ribbons.”

“Yes, I have seen them.”

“What did you think about those girls?”

I looked at Kai. Her hair was short, too, even though it was not quite to my extent.

“How was it for you, back in the days, Ms. Kai?”

She chuckled.

“Now, you are asking me. Umm, how shall I answer that?”

“Pardon me, ma’am.”

“I had long hair. It was long enough to hide my upper back.” She inhaled once and exhaled a thin streak of smoke. “I don’t quite want to recall my childhood days.”

“What do you mean by that, ma’am?”

“I find myself to be miserable.” Kai tried to laugh, but it was no longer her usual gentle smile. “I prefer the present. I always think so. Definitely, the current life is better than the past. I want to make it even better.”

“I do not quite have happy memories of the past either. I obviously find the present to be far more fun than the past.”

The waiter brought hors d’oeuvres to us. In the meantime, I looked at my hands below the table. I directed my attention toward my fingernails. *It’s time to clip them*, I thought.

“After the tomorrow’s operation is done, I want to buy you some clothes. What do you think about that? If you do not dislike it, that is.”

“I do not dislike it, but what type of clothes are you talking about?”

“What do you want?”

“I want a jumper.”

“So, I will buy you that.”

“Then, if I manage to make it back alive, please.” I told her so, and showed her

my smile. I myself thought it was a rare move, but it was a piece of cake for me.

“I’m sure you will come back alive. I have my faith in you. And, one more thing ...” Kai said while putting out the cigarette with an ashtray. “After this operation, you will be promoted to the higher rank, and have your own unit.”

“My own unit?”

“You will become a commander. It will be the first case as a Kildren. Also, the first female commander ever for actual combats.”

I kept silent.

I thought I had to say something. While looking for proper words, I was thinking about another thing in my mind.

“If possible, I want you to accept this offer.” Kai said.

“If I will not be able to pilot a fighter aircraft because of that, I would like to decline it.” I answered immediately.

“I have considered the option.” Kai nodded. “It is not rare for a commander to be on duty as a pilot for actual combats. We have not had such a case in our company in recent years, though ... So, I am certain that your request will be accepted as you wish.”

“Do you mean that the commander will order herself to make a sortie?”

“It is not that a commander can make decisions by herself without getting any consent from others and give the green light on a sortie. However, you are right about what you just said. Don’t you think it would grant you the greater degree of freedom than just doing whatever you are told to do?”

“If things go like that, I think I will have myself make a sortie all the time.”

“I don’t think that things will go like that.” Kai smiled. “You are not a selfish person who cannot understand the surrounding situation. You can pay careful attention to others, organize the entire group of people, and make an objective decision. You have the ability to do them.”

“I will move to another base, correct?”

“I think you will.”

“Will it be the war front?”

“It will be closer the current circumstance, or it will be closer to the front.”

“Really ...”

“We have yet to decide anything officially. Everything will be decided tomorrow night. I mean, if the conference will be held, that is.”

I will appoint Sasakura to be the mechanic, I thought, and almost let it slip out of my mouth. But, I did not have the authority to do so. Just a mere commander of a unit has no bragging right to make comments about the place to work, personnel to be allocated, or facilities. All I can do is to accept the duty, or to reject everything and then leave. Even so, if I say I will quit the company, I might be able to get their concession to some extent. I don't think I want to take such measures. Still, if worst comes to worst, I mean, for example, if I lose the opportunity to pilot a fighter aircraft, I will have to. I had vaguely anticipated it.

The offer was not bad, if I could still pilot an aircraft. If the news was functioning as a reward that I was getting for having a dinner with Kai, then I was getting more than I thought I deserved. Considering the fact that I could be happy just with such a proposition, it might have been a proof that I hardly expected a lot out of my own future. Although I had not been aware of that, I might have given it up a long time ago. I was predicting that the dogfight to be conducted on the next day would be my last one and I would never pilot a fighter aircraft again.

The company does not want me to fly anymore. The fact had slowly and repeatedly infiltrated my body. It sank deep into me like oil. *Of course, I absolutely don't want to admit it.* At the same time, I felt I could do nothing in front of the massive power.

To begin with, I had been looking forward to the dogfight to take place on the following day, probably because I had not wanted to think about the future after that.

I was thinking about such things this way and that.

I'm relieved. Tomorrow will not be the last. I was a bit delighted about that. Honestly, it made me happy. I thought I had to be glad. Even if that was the case, it was not easy for me to make myself smile.

The fact that I could sleep in a bed in such a hotel. The fact that I had a sumptuous meal in such a restaurant. All these things were insane. *Why do they not*

allow me to go back to the airbase and make a sortie as usual while following Goda's commands? Although I have always done those things, I wonder why I cannot continue to do them.

Did I do anything wrong to offend them? I have never done a bad thing. Rather, I have been working more diligently than other pilots have. I have done all that I can for my company. In spite of that, I am about to be pulled apart from the best situation for me. Why?

However ...

I had dealt with such feelings countless times in the past.

I had been patient and a good kid.

I had tried to fit into the environment around me.

They had taken away the situation, which I had managed to become familiar with, from me.

That's always ... been the case.

Why? I asked them.

"You are no longer a child." It was their answer.

It seems that there are things adults are not supposed to do, even if a child may be allowed to do the same things, I thought. The opposite case was supposed to be more typical under normal circumstances.

Most of the things were what I was not allowed to continue.

Does it mean that I am spoiled?

For example, one day in the past, when I came home from school, I could not find the stuffed animal I had really been fond of. My mother laughed and told me that she had burnt it because it had been getting too dirty.

"These are the relics." She handed something to me.

They were the glass eyeballs of the stuffed animal.

I was too dumbfounded to cry.

How in what way could she think like that?

What on earth do adults think and how?

I attempted to imagine them.

The word “mystery” was not enough to describe this.

Even so, as they did the similar things repeatedly, I ended up becoming familiar with that.

In short, everything was a ritual in which they made me believe I was about to transform from a child to an adult. In order to convince me that I was no longer a child but a decent adult, they offered sacrifices, lit them meaninglessly with fire, and burned them to ashes all the way. *Adults take away everything children have cherished.*

Now, you have become one of us, cruel adults.

They whispered so in my ear.

Then, they were all cackling incessantly.

We could not remain to be children forever.

Humans would die after becoming ugly adults.

I had such a solid prediction.

That’s why.

I unconsciously predicted that I could not continue to pilot an aircraft forever. So, it might have been natural for me to think that I would put my everything on the flight, the battle, and all of what my life was. *It must be the only means of survival as a pilot,* I came to think.

I see. This point is where I’m a child.

I want them to continue to let me be what I am.

Like a child, who selfishly cries, “I wanna play more in this place!”, even when an amusement park is about to be closed.

I’m not ready to sleep yet. I want to read a picture book more.

Children always crave for continuing something.

But, the wishes are not accepted.

The system of this world undergoes generational shifts one after another. Open things close, things that are moving will stop, and those which are going up must be brought down. Nothing shall remain still. It is the rule.

Maybe ...

Because humans themselves are such beings.

Humans themselves will die someday, once they have been born.

They cannot escape from the cycle of living things.

I guessed it was the wisdom of the preparation for the rule.

Children, however, do not possess wisdom like that.

We do not have the cycle.

So ...

Now and forever.

The same things.

The same pleasures.

We wish them ...

To continue.

I could make an analysis in this way. I was convinced by the hypothesis.

However, on the other hand ...

We are afraid of this endless chain.

We think we want to escape at one point.

It is also the solid feeling.

I mean, the fact is that not a few Kildren want to kill themselves. There is another fact that we would love to get jobs that allow us to face the risks of our lives. Just like other Kildren, I myself was not afraid of my own death. Probably, not as scared as ordinary people in general were. There is only one life for anyone. The conditions are the same. But, for some reason, the feel of distance for death differs from person to person.

Is it the motivation to put an end to the repeated cycle at our own will?

I can understand it well.

Even though we are the different kinds of people, some old cells hidden

somewhere within us would make us reject the eternity. That is how I can feel.

I want to check out and confirm death.

But I can try it only once.

The same condition.

If I can try it only once.

It is natural for me to devote it to whatever I believe is the noblest.

That is what I think.

I conformed myself to the conversation with Kai and ate the meal properly to spend time. Although I wondered whether I would talk about what I was giving my thoughts to, I could not do so, as expected. At least, I could not expect her to understand them in such occasions at that time. No matter how many words I might have used, my profound truth would not be understood by her definitely. Hatred, doubts, or sympathy would come sooner than understanding. Those unnecessary feelings would prevent her from comprehending them. If I talked to a certain point, she would stop accepting the meanings of what I would continue to talk. I knew that was the way it was, because it always happened to me.

At the end of the dinner, I drank coffee, which was bitter like metal, with a small cup. It was the coffee which I could think was the most delicious. It was similar to that of the café where Sasakura brought me. Come to think of it, I could conclude that the coffee at the café was first-rate, despite its reasonable price.

I wonder how Sasakura is doing.

I guess he is still doing some mechanical works in the tent located in the airfield.

Why can I not be there?

It was mysterious for me that there was quite a distance between the tent and me. I expected that I would take a shower after this dinner and fall asleep on the dry, pure white bed in the tranquil room. *Mysterious, isn't it?*

What is trying to pull me away from the reality?

Kai and I got into the elevator together. Only I got off and parted from her while bowing. Kai smiled. Her usual smile. I imagined what type of girl she had been

when she once had long hair.

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Although I had a good sleep during the night, I had a sore throat when I woke up in the morning.

I opened the curtains and found out that it was not raining. Not a fine weather, though. I could expect the weather to hold that way somehow. *If anything, I may prefer the weather that is not too bright.*

I gargled in the bathroom and washed my face. During the process, I started having the urge to take a shower, and took off my clothes.

I felt as if I were already sitting in the cockpit to some extent. I was holding the control stick in my imagination. I was tracing the movement of the Teacher's aircraft. My body was tense. When I breathed, my muscles trembled. *Is it a tremor of excitement?*

I wiped my hair with a towel, and looked at my face in the mirror. She was glaring fixedly at me. I wanted to say something to her, but I could not come up with what to say. I tried to form a smile by moving my mouth forcefully. It was not funny at all.

I went out of the bathroom, and got dressed. I packed up my possessions. I might never come back to this room. However, it was nothing new.

I left the room. I walked in the dim corridor to the elevator. I passed by a middle-aged woman, who was pushing a wagon. She seemed to be a working staff. She greeted me while bowing. I remained silent.

I went down to the lobby, left the room key at the front desk, and headed for the exit. Everyone in the lobby was looking back at me. A bellboy opened the door for me. I got into a taxi, which was waiting for me at a rotary.

"To the airfield." I said. "I mean, to the back gate."

I felt the temperature of the blood running through my body was slowly rising. If there were such a thing as blood temperature gauge, the meter needle would have gone up by one tick.

The cityscape was flowing. Cars running all over the place. People were coming and going on sidewalks. I occasionally looked up at towering skyscrapers. The windows were reflecting the slightly bright sky.

All these good people.

No one remembers anymore that humans have been killing each other since ancient times.

It was an old tale in a distant past, like a fantasy story in another universe.

I thought everyone would probably feel that way.

Then ...

They repeatedly say, "Wars are ugly. Wars are stupid."

Of course, they are right.

Nothing can be more ridiculous than they are.

But ...

I surely felt a reaction which could not be described at all.

What is it?

What is this spiritual elevation?

Why do we live?

Why do we climb up to the sky at the risk of our lives?

What is life?

Is it what's within us?

At least ...

My life is accompanying me when I am ascending to the sky.

When I am fighting, it is with me.

In the past, I tried to part from my own life.

It can be done easily.

At any time, people can detach the lives from their existences.

Even so, why does my life accompany such a being that I am?

I do not understand.

Is it the reason?

Anyway, the current version of me is careful of my life.

I learned to do so by fighting.

How can I understand this worth of life without fighting?

Not a few comrades fell from the sky.

As I observed them, I came to understand it little by little.

In order to actually obtain their lives, people die.

Only the dead ones are winners.

No worries.

My life is waiting for me properly.

It is waiting until I take a fall.

Probably ...

At the time ...

I would get the most important thing.

I believe that.

Wait for me.

I will show you a beautiful thing.

If I have to die, I shall do so today.

Definitely, it has got to be today.

I mean, the opponent is the Teacher.

There is no opportunity greater than this.

He advised me that I should “save” the maneuver involving the stall and snap turn “until the final moment”. Since then, I had hardly used it. I had been preserving it for that day.

In my mind, not a few curves were drawn.

The trajectories crossed each other.

His trace was white, mine was blue.

They were intertwined like ribbons.

Entangled with each other.

Beautifully.

With no serious traffic jam, the taxi had arrived at the gate of the airfield. I got off there. I wanted to walk a little.

I happened to notice something and looked back at the opposite side of the road. A station wagon was parked there. The door was opened, followed by Somanaka appearing from inside. He stood beside the vehicle and bowed toward me. He did not seem to intend to walk toward me. I wondered if he was making the station wagon his place to stay. No, that could not be. He had arrived at the place in the early morning. I noticed so from the fact that the place where the vehicle was being parked was different from that in the previous occasion.

I raised my hand and made a faint smile for him. I wondered why, but I did not dislike him. Because I could feel his sincerity. I was not sure why I was approving his presence favorably.

I greeted the gatekeeper as well. I was walking on the premises. No one was around me. Only the engine sounds of airplanes were reverberating.

In front of the tent, Kai was standing. She noticed me and started walking toward me.

“I called you in the morning.” She said. “It appears that we have ended up crossing and passing by each other.”

“Perhaps, I was taking a shower at that point of time.”

“I obtained the information, according to which it might be conducted relatively early.”

“Really. How is Sasakura?”

“He’s inside. He said there is nothing more that he can do.”

“If so, I can take off at any time.” I answered.

“Originally, a few notable figures were scheduled to come here in the morning. But I think the aerial duel will take place sooner than that.”

“I got it, ma’am.”

“But not just now. We have still some time. Why don’t you drink hot coffee inside during the time?”

Someone else was coming. Kai stayed outside the tent. I entered the tent alone. No one was around the Sanka. Compared to the situation on the first day, the smell was exactly that of a hangar. To put it another way, the scent of fuel and oil had soaked into the place. At the entrance of the office building, Sasakura was sitting alone.

“Morning.” I greeted while approaching him.

“Hey.” He nodded. “I have already filled it with fuel. No drop tank from the start. As usual, the weapon configuration is Anti-aircraft Type A.”

“Roger.”

I passed by him and got into the office. A thermos bottle and a pile of paper cups were on the table. I sat on a sofa, picked up a cup, and pour the content of the thermos bottle into it. I stopped it when the black liquid filled about the half of the cup.

“Sasakura, would you like to drink?”

“Yeah.” He stood up and entered the room.

I poured the liquid into another cup for him.

“Thanks.” He received the cup.

I sipped the coffee. *Not so hot, but bitter and tasty.*

“Was it hard?” I asked.

“About what?”

“Maintenance.”

“No.” Sasakura raised his head while drinking coffee. “This is my job, as usual.”

“Are you not looking somewhat gloomy?”

“This is my usual face.”

Come to think of it, he might be right. Considering the fact that he was brought to such an unfamiliar place just for me, I was having a slight sense of guilt. He was conducting researches on this and that on a constant basis as his hobby. It had to be no fun for him, just because he could not invest his time on it.

Sasakura drank up coffee quickly and got out of the office. The door was closed, so I could not see outside. I smoked a cigarette. Then, I leaned back against the back of the sofa and shut my eyes. I might have been sleeping. I felt that such a long span of time had elapsed.

When I opened my eyes next time, Kai and another uniformed man were standing by the door. I did not know his name.

“We are receiving the order for you to stand by.” Kai said.

I stood up.

The shutter of the tent was already opened. Sasakura and others were tugging the Sanka outside. They were using a wire and an electric winch.

“Happy hunting.” The man beside Kai said.

I made a salute without saying anything.

When the Sanka was pulled outside and turned to a proper direction, I got into the cockpit. The windshield was still half-opened.

Sasakura stepped onto the wing, and walked toward me to get closer.

“Do you have anything that concerns you?”

“Nothing.”

“The humidity is almost the same as that of yesterday.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Hey, do not worry about me.” I said.

“Go ahead, and start the engine.”

“Okay. Is it all clear behind?”

“All clear.”

I checked the brakes first, turned on the switch for the starter motor.

The airframe started quivering slightly, and then the propellers began to patter. It was smooth enough to make me feel comfortable.

“Do not forget. I choked it more than usual. So, be careful when you have to reach an unexpectedly high altitude. Listen to the engine sound carefully.”

“Of course, I know that. Do you remember for how long I have been piloting this?” I put on the helmet.

Kai walked to the space in front of the wing and shouted something. I could not hear it.

“We have identified the opposing aircraft. In 13 minutes.” Sasakura relayed it for me.

“Good timing. Let’s keep warming up the engine.”

Kai shouted something again.

“You have already gotten the permission to take off. She had just ordered you to proceed to the runway.”

“Special treatment, eh?”

“Do not become desperate.”

“What?”

“I said, ‘Do not become desperate.’”

“I heard that.” I answered. “But I don’t get it.”

Sasakura leaned forward and brought his face close to mine. I lifted the helmet a little to listen to him.

“I mean, do not become desperate just because your opponent is the ‘Teacher.’”

“Why do I need to become desperate?” I asked back.

“Come back here alive, okay?” Sasakura said.

I burst into laughter for that one.

“If I go down, I will do so onto this place.” I dared to declare so. “You should stay alert, and pay attention to the sky.”

“Fair enough.” Sasakura nodded.

“You have not witnessed a dogfight within such a close range, have you? Carefully observe how beautifully I will fly.”

“Okay.” He raised a hand.

Sasakura got off the wing. I put on the helmet again and fastened the seatbelt. I checked the meters and the control surfaces, one by one. An aircraft marshaller standing before my aircraft waved a flag.

I looked sideways and found uniformed figures standing in front of the tent. They seemed to have just arrived at the scene. They were watching me while squinting, as if something was too shiny. *If they feel that this weather is blindingly bright for them, then they are like moles*, I thought.

I pushed up the engine throttle and unlocked the brakes.

The Sanka was slowly proceeding to the taxiway.

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While letting the engine idle at the edge of the runway for about eight minutes, I got the exact information regarding the direction from which the opposing aircraft was coming and the distance between us. Once my aircraft proceeded to the runway, a siren wailed somewhere. But it was drowned out by the engine sound. I took off at a shallow angle and shook the wings to the right and left in order to view the tent and the control tower.

I made a climb, and then a turn.

I gained the altitude, while checking the direction with the gauges.

The problem is, up to what altitude I should ascend. As of now, I can do nothing but wait for the opponent's move.

Although I could not see the blue sky, the clouds were not disgustingly low.

Again, I was given the information about the opponent's current location through

the radio.

Only one aircraft. The type was unknown.

Either way, the pilot in the cockpit is he.

He seemed to have lowered its altitude already. He was probably intending to lure me to the lower altitude from the beginning.

I softened the climbing a bit. I adjusted the trim tabs of the control surfaces.

To get the feeling of air, I made a roll once.

I can't see him yet.

I had already reached the distance from which I was supposed to be able to see him. Probably, the lack of visibility was due to the murky air.

I adjusted the orientation of the aircraft a bit to make it obliquely angled, and focused on the direction from which he was supposed to be coming.

Farm fields spread over the surface below me. A flat, spacious plane.

I saw a river, too. Many bridges were crossing over the river.

I found a railroad. Cars of various colors were running on roads.

People living on the ground.

They were forming files like ants.

I cannot see him yet.

White clouds were floating motionlessly above me. Almost no wind.

Come to me quickly.

Finally, I can meet you again in the sky.

I haven't met anyone whom I can eagerly anticipate the encounter with by this much.

There was nothing I could focus on.

I tried to look for anything that was floating.

It's about time.

Where?

Hurry. Come on.

Here it comes!

“Target confirmed.” I reported through the radio.

An extraneous dot was floating in the sky. It hardly moved. Its altitude was approximately the same as mine. It seemed that it was coming straight toward me.

Usually, I would have fastened my seatbelt tightly again at this timing. However, it was fastened from the beginning. *Thanks to the reservation I made in advance, the waiting time has ended up being very short.*

I was circling obliquely.

A deep breath.

I did not put on the goggles. I might not need them, if the condition would remain the same.

Gradually, I was beginning to recognize its shape.

The opponent changed its course, too.

I checked the meters, and further adjusted the trim tabs.

I listened to the engine sound.

No anomaly found in the sound.

It is getting closer.

It was an aircraft with a gull-wing configuration, with an air-cooled engine. The type was similar to Suiga. I could not tell its color yet.

I let my aircraft lean to one side, and made a bank move. I started a large turning maneuver. The opponent continued to fly straight, lunging at me.

But at the time, he shook his wings to the right and left.

It's definitely the Teacher.

I also deflected the right and left ailerons in opposite directions, in order to return a greeting.

Now, let's do it.

Let's dance.

Dance together!

It was so fun that I felt like laughing.

I increased the inclination, and slowly pulled the stick to control the elevators gradually.

I pushed up the throttle gently.

It was a proper route to take the position behind him.

He will probably start turning.

Then, will he fly upward? Or, downward?

However, he was still flying straight.

Rather, he seemed to be speeding up.

He was flying toward the downtown area. I pushed up the throttle and accelerated. When it came down to flying straight horizontally, his speed had to be a bit faster than mine.

I flew and followed him for a while.

I clucked my tongue several times.

I want him to dance with me asap. I wanna dance with him together.

He leaned his wings to one direction.

He pitched downward, and lowered the altitude.

It's about time, eh?

To follow him, I dove. The distance was still far.

Machine gun bullets would not be able to reach it.

We flew over high-voltage power line towers and sped across the airspace above a residential area diagonally.

Nothing else was flying around us.

Although the airfield was near, the runway was probably closed off.

He was intending to descend even more.

I chose a relatively high route. The angle of the course and the orientation of the aircraft would result in the limited view, but I would still follow him. He reduced the speed a little. It appeared that he was not intending to increase the distance between him and me.

After the housing complexes was a forest zone. We flew it over in a moment, and crossed a large river. We were approaching the city. The current altitude was about twice as high as high-rise buildings.

Those on the ground must have already been hearing the noisy engine sounds of our two aircrafts. They were far more high-pitched than those of passenger airplanes. They might have never heard them before.

I was catching up with him. The distance was getting shortened.

So, what's your next move?

Suddenly, he started turning sharply.

“Here it comes!”

Hastily, I closed the throttle.

I lowered the flaps. The brakes were applied, and the airframe creaked.

I turned to the right.

The opposite direction.

To the left.

I could not see the scenery anymore.

Today, I need not worry about what goes on around me.

My opponent is just one aircraft.

I made a bank move by almost 90 degrees, and made a turn. I was looking at him above me.

Then, he made a steep climb.

It is a feint, I thought.

I played along with his move a bit, and brought myself back to my own route immediately.

As expected, he was diving into the right while turning over.

I too began descending while rolling by 180 degrees and being inverted.

Approaching.

I took the position right behind him.

I released the safety lock of the machine guns.

Is it possible to get the opportunity this soon?

His aircraft turned over.

Ascending?

No, stalling!

I cannot make it on time.

I hesitated for a moment, but I found my left hand pushing up the throttle instinctively.

I have to fly through it.

I lowered the altitude, and then went full throttle.

The Teacher instantly moved behind me, and he was out of my sight.

What a splendid stalling.

“You told me not to do that!”

I'm in a good mood.

Although he took the position behind me, he was still far from me.

I am the one who can accelerate faster than the other.

I believe I would be able to shake him off by climbing up. Shall I make a big loop?

But it might be risky if he gets inside the loop at the top.

I looked back from both left and right sides to check his location.

I should be patient for a little while.

Right behind me?

I saw him.

We still had a certain distance.

I could stall, but he would expect me to do that. *If he responds quickly, it would be a serious loss for me. I cannot do the same trick.* I just recalled that Sasakura advised me to fly downward.

I went into the steep dive without a break.

I was approaching the ground very fast.

Shall I go for the outside loop?

Rolling over.

I pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators.

I saw him obliquely behind me, at the higher altitude.

The Teacher was still flying in the upside-down orientation.

He is probably looking at me.

Control surfaces in neutral positions.

I was flying through the low altitude with the full throttle.

My flight vector was lower than the top floors of buildings.

No high-rise buildings in this area. I lowered the altitude as low as I could, to the extent that I might as well be landing on the road shortly.

An embankment of a river was coming ahead of me.

I looked back. He was still following me.

However, he probably won't get any closer.

I flew over the embankment, and lowered the altitude again.

A meadow overgrown with weeds.

And the water surface.

I checked the meters. Oil temperature and oil pressure were both normal.

I looked back at the Teacher to make sure of his current location.

He has got to be waiting for my next climbing.

Shall I prolong it a bit more?

Every once in a while, I changed the angle slightly.

That would make him fly the slightly longer distance.

In that respect, the escaper has the advantage over the chaser.

I listened to the engine sound.

I recalled the Sasakura's advice. I looked at the meter for the choke valve.

He fired shots. I went to the right reflexively.

I looked back.

Have we gotten this close to each other?

The distance has been decreased by a little.

Fairly fast?

I wondered if he had the engine tuned up.

We were getting closer to the city.

Shall I ascend? Or, should I lunge?

I suspect that he is waiting for me to climb.

Will I live up to his expectation?

Or, will I betray his expectation and keep flying straight?

The engine was in good condition. It was getting revved up.

Today's main event has just started.

While somewhat feinting to the left and right, I kept flying straight.

I looked around. More buildings than before. Roads were very near.

High-rise buildings were soaring high in front of me.

We were approaching another embankment again. I circled to the left side a bit.

Flying over the embankment diagonally.

I descended so low again to the level that I was about to touch the water surface.

I checked what was behind me. *Is he getting farther behind?*

I will execute a loop maneuver once.

At a location where he cannot get inside the loop.

A giant iron bridge was approaching. Its bridge girder was far higher than the altitude at which I was currently flying. *Shall I fly through below it? Or, will I ascend to the left or right side?* On the right side was the city area. To the left was a suburban area. *If I fly toward the downstream of the river, will I reach the industrial zone?* I saw tall chimneys in the distance.

I looked behind to check. He was getting even closer.

I was reaching the bridge very fast.

Its lower part and the upper part seemed to be railroads and automobile roads, respectively.

It was close enough for me to clearly recognize the moving vehicles.

The throttle was left untouched.

I put on the goggles with my left hand.

My right hand was focusing on the control stick.

I no longer had any option of whether to fly to the left side or the right.

Getting there.

The water surface was near. The giant bridge was getting so close and dominated the view.

Now.

I pulled the control stick slowly and steadily.

Ascending.

The airframe creaked.

My body was pushed against the seat.

I looked back, but could not see him.

Pointing straight up.

The engine was groaning.

I could see many automobiles running on the road.

Assuming the inverted flight.

I flew over the wires of the bridge.

When reaching the point right above the bridge, I could see the Teacher.

I knew he was the one. He started making a loop. *Very fast response.*

But, I wonder if he can make a smaller loop.

The wires of the bridge would be my obstacles, so it would be dangerous for me to do a stall turn.

I looked downward and closed the throttle.

Extending the flaps.

Pulling the control stick for the elevator deflection.

The bridge girder dominated the view right in front of me again.

I slid under it.

This time, the angle is rendering me prone to dive into the water.

Elevators.

I looked behind me.

The Teacher executed a roll maneuver.

Giving up.

Yes!

I was skimming just above the water surface.

I aligned my aircraft a bit obliquely.

The moment, at which the wing edge was about to touch the water.

I pushed up my left hand. *Full throttle.*

The aircraft was inclined even more due to the effect of the torque reaction. I let it play a part in the maneuvering as it was.

I went up obliquely.

He was flying beyond the bridge, to the upstream way of the river, and started circling.

I have shaken him off completely.

I made the ascent even more, and made a roll just when I got right above the bridge.

I took the position that was obliquely above and behind the Teacher.

He flew over the embankment and headed for the city area.

While maintaining the altitude, I pursued him.

It's my turn to wait for his move. If he takes an action, I would get the chance. Considering our current locations, he cannot possibly ascend. Once he loses the speed while facing upward, it would be fatal for him.

I flew above a road.

The altitude was as low as 100 meters.

The oil temperature rose a bit. The oil pressure was okay.

I was approaching a building. I was still at the higher altitude than its height.

I see. He is trying to turn while making use of the building. Because of the building, I can't use the inside path. I did not think about the tactical maneuver.

I constructed many simulations in my brain.

He is most likely to climb and fly to the left. The problem is when he does it.

Buildings around me were gradually getting higher, from my point of view.

I was approaching the downtown area.

I passed signboards and antennas immediately.

Of course, I did not care about those things. They were no more than mere obstacles.

I entered the valley between the buildings, and flew through it.

Windows were lined up on both sides of me.

I felt suppressed, but it was not too narrow as a path.

The turbulence that the aircraft flying ahead of me was causing was slightly more annoying than that.

I raised the altitude a bit.

Again, I was approaching high-rise buildings. There were many of them this time.

I entered the space between them.

At the time, the Teacher was ascending.

I was surprised.

What is the intention now?

Despite the doubt in my mind, my right hand pulled the control stick.

Climbing up.

Looping, here?

His aircraft was getting closer.

The engine was choked.

Shucks.

Stall turn, again.

No way.

I attempted to push up my left hand, but it was already at full throttle.

I ascended and assumed the inverted orientation.

I looked at the Teacher.

After the stall, he changed the direction with the propeller slipstream.

He turned to another street at an intersection.

He instantly disappeared from my sight.

Awesome!

Such a move cannot be made with a Sanka.

It was a technique which he could execute thanks to the tractor configuration.

I was holding my breath.

I rolled over by 180 degrees at the top of the loop.

There were still buildings on both sides, and I came close to scratching the walls with my aircraft.

I closed the throttle.

I lost the visual contact with him completely.

Where?

I looked back to the right side.

He has to be to my right.

I climbed more and escaped from the forest of buildings.

I let my aircraft be oriented obliquely, and looked around below me.

Automobiles, buses, and trucks were moving.

But, I did not see any aircraft.

Where?

I looked for him by flying upside-down.

He was lunging from the right side ahead of me.

He had been flying farther from me than expected. It seemed that he had just flown through the streets at an amazing speed.

I adjusted the course immediately. I still had the advantage, considering the fact that I was flying at the higher altitude than he was doing.

Although I expected him to start turning, he lowered the altitude and was entering the forest of buildings. I followed him.

This time, his speed was slower than it was earlier. I found his aircraft ahead of me.

Because I was flying downward, I was a bit faster than he.

I think I will catch up on him.

He went down even more.

The altitude was tens of meters.

Getting closer.

What's the next move?

Going up again?

The target was now within the shooting range.

I held my breath.

I shot.

He evaded to the right.

He had the wings oriented perpendicularly to the ground, and was flying as if his airframe were licking the wall of a building.

I closed the throttle a little.

I lowered the flaps a bit.

I'd better not pass him by.

He was within my shooting range again. But he rocked the wings to the left before I shot the bullets.

He could execute the move not because of the relatively low speed, but because of the buildings being there. I wondered if it would be called the “wall effect”, or something like that.

This time, his aircraft with his wings oriented vertically was right in front of me momentarily.

I fired at him.

I thought the bullets hit him, but I was not sure.

He instantly vanished to the right.

I was shocked.

He turned to the right at the intersection.

I also let my wings go vertical quickly, but it was impossible for me to turn.

There is no way for me at all of making a turn here.

I pushed up the throttle immediately, and started ascending.

I lost the visual contact of him again.

Amazing.

I could not imagine anyone else flying like that.

I looked back and searched for his aircraft.

The engine was groaning and my shoulders were being pushed against the seat.

I found him.

He was flying far below me.

I took off the goggles, and rubbed my eyes.

I was sweating.

A deep breath.

I put on the goggles again, and dove from the inverted orientation.

I think I am surely recognizing and comprehending the characteristics of his aircraft.

He was flying above a main street at a relatively low speed.

He was looking as if he was inviting me to come down.

How could I imagine anyone dancing in such a narrow place?

Still, I was laughing.

Interesting.

In the middle of my descent, I saw something in the rear view to the right side.

It's a helicopter.

A civilian property?

I ignored it, and continued to dive anyway.

In a moment, I caught up with him.

Now I put on the brakes.

Full flaps.

He turned to the left at the intersection.

I will try that, too.

While choking the engine, I let the nose point upward and deadened the velocity.

I oriented the wings vertical and turned sharply with the elevators. I adjusted the course with the rudders.

I managed to turn to the left easily. I closed in on the aircraft flying ahead of me.

When I expected him to be within my shooting range, he rolled and turned over by 180 degrees.

He took the position below me.

It astounded me by quite a bit.

There was no more space below.

While being astonished, I started ascending conversely.

He was so close to the ground that he might have collided with it.

Outside loop, eh?

There had to be not enough space for making a roll maneuver at the bottom of the airspace.

While seeing the rooftop of a building, I brought the flight attitude back to the inverted horizontal again.

He was ascending toward me.

He was rolling while climbing.

He was about to take the position behind me.

I don't have time to think this and that.

It would be dangerous for me to ascend.

I pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators, and flew downward.

This very moment is risky.

Did he fire the shot?

No, he didn't.

A road was getting close very fast.

While pointing straight down, I further pulled the elevator control even more.

I deflected the ailerons to let the aircraft lean, and then used the rudders.

The altitude was 40.

Right above an automobile, I finally let the aircraft assume the horizontal attitude.

At the height which was low enough for me to jump off from the cockpit to the ground, I pushed up the throttle.

The engine exhaled the breath.

The exhaust was wafting in the air.

I saw his aircraft at the higher altitude behind me obliquely.

I will be shot, the thought flashed.

But, he did not.

Why?

I flew straight with the full throttle.

Accelerate!

Hurry!

The altitude was as low as about 10 meters.

I could barely pass by a pedestrian overbridge.

Let me pray that there is no electric wire getting on my way, shall I?

The velocity was increasing more and more.

The building on my both sides appeared to be flying backward fiercely.

The airframe was vibrating.

Dancing now.

He does not shoot at me.

Have I gained enough distance?

The rear view is not clear.

Where?

It would be dangerous for me to ascend.

If he shot at me, it would let me know his coordinate.

Why does he not fire shots?

Perhaps, is he worrying about the damage to the people in the area?

About the possibility that the stray bullets might hit buildings or automobiles?

I did not think that he could afford to worry about such matters.

A green zone that appeared to be a park was getting closer.

There was no building within the vicinity.

I let the wings go vertical.

Once I passed through the valley of buildings, I turned to the left slightly.

I looked back.

At the location I had expected, I saw his aircraft flying.

I thought I was within his shooting range.

I was convinced that he did not shoot at me on purpose.

That was the zone to feel safe in.

The bullets would not hit any building.

Fire at me. Come on!

I will evade it.

I pushed the throttle to the high level.

I controlled the ailerons to bank to the right and left.

About when we was drawing near me, I made a roll to the opposite direction.

Then, turn to right quickly.

Immediately, take the opposite course.

Did he shoot?

I'm not sure.

I let the flaps down, and choked the engine.

I reduced the turn radius and increased the bank angle.

His aircraft pitched upward.

I let mine point upward as well. *Is he stalling again?*

Snap.

His aircraft hovered and danced like a leaf.

I made a barrel roll and waited for his next move.

Here he comes.

He was intending to approach me from inside.

To the opposite way ...

I deflected the control surfaces busily.

The engine groaned, became quiet soon, and groaned again.

I hear the wind blowing the aircraft.

Intermittently.

The sound of the wings creaking.

It's the dance.

Fluttering.

Dancing.

We would look as if we were playing around together.

The two of our aircrafts.

Playing here in the sky.

Gracefully ...

Beautifully ...

Dancing.

Sideslipping.

Twisting.

Torque roll.

Knife-edge.

I will show you.

I'm coming now.

Full flaps.

Deflect the right aileron, and then the left.

Throttle off.

Elevators, fully deflected for the upward pitching.

After the sudden stall, I put the throttle to the high level instantly.

Escape maneuver, directly afterward.

It was the turn maneuver that I was once advised by him not to do.

I believe it has become much sharper than before.

Like a fluttering knife.

The wings of my aircraft were shining momentarily.

I had the nose point to the direction, which the Teacher was turning to.

My pulses.

Come on!

I held the breath for the moment.

He's coming.

Fire!

Making a turn.

I think that one got him.

I broke away while making a banking turn.

I checked the view behind me.

His airframe was rolling, too.

He was coming above me.

No, he didn't get shot.

Darn it!

He's coming from above me.

Right.

Down.

Left.

I slid by using the rudders, and made a roll to the opposite direction.

Up.

Throttle high.

As if he were scraping against mine, his airframe was sliding forward.

It was too close for me to fire the shots.

I controlled the nose.

Before I was ready to shoot, he moved to the left.

That's fast.

I deflected the control surfaces so violently as to come close to make them pop away.

The instantaneous velocity.

We were the ones who had survived with such instantaneity.

He took the position below me. *The role reversal.*

To the right.

Climbing up, and then diving downward.

Left.

To the left.

I made a feint with the rudders, and put on the brakes with flaps.

I used the snap maneuver to bring the wing from the opposite, and started making a turn.

He was shooting at me.

I heard the sound. *But, I'm all right.*

Is he above me?

The shadow passed by instantaneously.

I looked at the coordinate ahead of him, and made a loop.

The Teacher was executing a large aerial twist.

He is fully motivated, eh?

The main event of our show has not yet started.

I checked the meters.

Oil temperature was a bit high.

The fuel was more than half full.

I wonder how much fuel he has got left.

It depends on where he has flown from to arrive at the duel zone. It cannot be that far.

At the altitude of 150 meters above the park.

Low-speed turn.

At almost the same speed, he was turning as well.

I clearly recognized the marking of a black cat on the cowling.

I took off the goggles once.

The sky was not so bright.

The oil pressure was normal and the engine was in a good condition.

I have received no damage so far.

It's about time that our warm-up would end.

This ain't enough yet.

I exhaled the breath.

Now, time for the main dish.

I put on the goggles again, and pulled the control stick slightly.

Closing the throttle.

Half flaps.

I entered the circle.

He noticed it in a moment.

He was escaping toward the outside.

High throttle.

I retracted the flaps.

Right.

Climbing up.

Stalling.

I cut the throttle.

Putting on the brakes with full flaps.

With the control that made use of the torque on the aircraft, I let the nose of the aircraft point to a direction.

Fire.

How's that?

He is going up.

I am climbing up as well.

Is he entering a stalling maneuver?

I rolled, and then paid attention to his aircraft.

Turning.

He was just about to point downward.

I plucked up my courage, and pushed up the throttle.

Then, I entered the ascending phase. That was the art that could be performed thanks to the light weight of this airframe.

While flying inverted, I climbed. He was turning below me.

Did he not take a bullet, as expected?

Here he comes, climbing up.

I pulled the stick to control the elevators, and dove while keeping the upside-down orientation.

Interception.

Right in front.

He's flying straight, too.

Fire!

Grazing.

We passed by each other in the air.

I made a quick turn, and looked back while bracing my body by planting legs firmly.

He made a stall turn again.

He is doing it again.

Okay!

I made a half turn with the full up, and then the throttle was set to high.

His aircraft is much faster than mine, but it doesn't matter because each of us is flying toward the other.

We faced each other.

He was sliding toward me.

I was ascending.

Adjusting the direction that the nose was pointing toward slightly.

We were about to collide with each other.

Fire.

I got it!

He shot at me, too.

I saw the muzzles of his machine guns throwing sparks.

We passed by each other.

The bullets did not seem to hit the target.

It's weird.

I'm still flying.

Is he flying as well?

No smoke emitted.

Rolling.

I made a snap to the opposite direction.

I looked at him.

He was flying straight toward the direction opposite of mine.

Did he get hit by the bullets?

Or, is he having any trouble?

I turned while making a gentle loop.

Getting poised to chase.

He ascended.

He was flying upward straight.

I opened the throttle as well.

When it came down to the climbing ability, Sanka was superior.

I was catching up with him little by little.

He was dancing to the right and left gracefully.

He was gaining the altitude in zigzag.

Still, I was gradually approaching him.

What is he thinking?

He cannot possibly get away in this manner.

We were going up fairly high.

The ground below was out of sight.

Clouds were getting closer.

Where to?

Too slow to hide in the cloud.

I was flying to the right and left, to synchronize with his movement.

Because of the higher altitude, the engine was giving off a drier sound.

Although I wanted to adjust the choke valve, he was about to enter my shooting range.

I focused on it.

To the right.

Then, to the left.

The attitude adjustment with the rudders.

To the downward slightly.

Take this.

Fire!

I broke away to the right.

I win!

But, his aircraft still kept ascending.

I too was climbing, while watching it.

Before long, he was vanishing into the cloud.

In the meantime, I adjusted the choke valve.

The scenery around me became white in an instant.

The airframe was quivering.

I kept on ascending more.

I checked the fuel gauge, and adjusted the trim tabs.

A deep breath.

Sweat began to trickle down.

Have I just won?

Where is the Teacher?

Is this the heaven, by any chance?

Do not tell me that I was shot before I knew it.

Taking a deep breath.

I found myself coughing.

That's okay. I'm still alive.

I felt that the engine sound became louder suddenly.

The white color around me was getting lighter.

Blinding.

Light.

Above the cloud.

A pure blue sky.

It spread out beautifully.

The white clouds were now below me.

An aircraft was flying ahead of me.

I just located the Teacher's aircraft.

Has he been flying straight?

Did he not get hit by the bullets?

What chivalry.

Ah, beautiful.

I had known it all along that the true sky was above the clouds.

Yes, indeed ...

He was probably having the same thought in his mind.

This has got to be our stage.

He shook his wings to the right and left.

I found myself laughing out loud.

That's the way it has got to be.

I chased after him.

I was approaching him from behind to the left side.

How my bullets had failed to land on him was a mystery.

I was so sure that he received the bullets.

There was no way that I would miss the shots with the distance and the range.

Tell me that he actually got hit.

Does this mean that the bullets luckily missed the critical spots?

The Teacher was flying horizontally.

I was closing in on him.

I took the position behind him.

Still.

He won't budge.

Why?

He was flying ahead of me, and fired shots.

What is he doing?

Since he lowered the speed, I got even closer to him.

The distance was shortening.

If I fire shots now, I can definitely bring him down.

But ...

I adjusted the course a little to the oblique direction, and kept the position beside him.

I was bringing my aircraft close to his.

I could see what was inside the canopy.

I recognized his face.

Is he alive?

He is.

He's moving.

He was showing something with his hand.

I got even closer to him.

Numbers.

I noticed that he was indicating a frequency value.

He knew how good my eyesight was.

He was giving me directions for tuning the radio to the particular frequency.

Four, One, Three, One.

I hastily tuned the radio to the number.

“Do you read me?” Suddenly, his voice jumped into my ears. “Reduce the power output to the lowest level.”

“I do hear you.”

“We are done for today.” He stated.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Fuel issue?”

“No. Blank shots.”

At first, I was not sure of what he was speaking of. But, I soon noticed it.

No live ammunition.

Our aircrafts were not armed with live ammunition.

For that reason, there would be no bullet hitting the target, no matter how much they were fired.

They were just sounds.

“Darn it!” I shouted.

“That’s what we got. So, why don’t you go back quietly.”

My mind was going blank, and I could not say anything.

I have been had.

I have been deceived by everyone.

Those on the ground are in cahoots with each other.

Against me, they have me ...

“I’ll teach them a lesson.” I uttered.

“Boomerang.”

“What?”

“Cool down.”

“I can’t.”

“So, are you going to initiate a ramming attack, or something?”

Air ramming?

If I do not have real ammunition, then I can still bring down the target by executing the maneuver.

Surely, that is an option, I thought.

“I’m going back. Over and out.”

“Wait, Teacher.”

“What is it?”

“One more round.”

“Well.”

“I am begging you”

“Umm.”

“Would it be okay?”

“Do stay alive.”

“Roger.”

He had the wings in vertical orientation, and was slid down toward the opposite side.

I choked the engine, and leaned the control stick to one side.

My aircraft went into a stall before long, pointed downward, and started spinning slowly.

Let me take a fall.

To the ground.

Going into a spin.

Spinning faster and faster.

I entered the cloud.

Pure white.

This is heaven.

I will curse them.

I will go down all the way forever.

“Stupid idiots!” I shouted.

They are all big, stupid idiots.

Those on the ground, all humans, should die.

If I were carrying a bomb now, I would have dropped it on this city.

No, on the airfield.

In the faces of the spectators of this aerial duel near the front side of the tent.

As I got out of the cloud, the whole world appeared to be spinning.

Directed downward.

Falling while fluttering and spinning.

In this fashion, to elsewhere.

Penetrating the ground, to hell?

Both Kai and Sasakura had known that all along.

They have deceived me.

How dare you ...

Tears were welling up.

Do you all have any idea of what is important to me?

No way!

They have ruined everything.

Everything is wasted.

I won't forgive them!

Never.

I will die.

I will kill Suito Kusanagi, whom you all have placed high expectations on.

I will destroy her.

I will fling my Sanka and smash it against the center of this city.

But ...

Ah, but one thing.

I am still craving for dueling against the Teacher once more.

That, that is ...

What I promised.

Oh my.

It is my only regret.

It is the only contradiction.

The light of emergency radio was turned on. I switched the frequency of the receiver. My airframe continued to spin endlessly. I was not looking outside anymore.

“Boomerang, do you read us?”

“This is Boomerang.” I replied.

“What is happening?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“Return to the airfield immediately. The runway is ready for use.”

What shall I do?

I was in the upside-down orientation, and looked upward from my point of view.

I saw the city.

It was getting larger and larger while spinning.

Perhaps, the direction might be the zenith.

I mean, the Earth is floating above me.

“Boomerang, do you hear us?”

I clucked my tongue.

So noisy.

Some of the buildings were getting closer to me.

Oh, hell!

How can I go down on such a hellish place?

I brought the control surfaces back to the neutral positions.

While choking the engine, I tapped the control surfaces rapidly and repeatedly.

First, I stopped the spin.

My Sanka was now pointing straight down.

I heard the wind blowing by the wings.

Comfortable.

The ground was rapidly getting closer.

Roads, buildings, and vehicles.

I tilted the stick to deflect the elevators slowly and steadily.

The altitude was 200.

I made a roll in the middle, and let the cockpit face toward the sky.

Dive even more.

I slightly raised the nose of the aircraft.

I was sliding into a valley of buildings.

My left hand pushed up the throttle.

The altitude was down to 30.

Finally, I got it back to the horizontal flight attitude.

The engine raced explosively, and the airframe was twisted due to the torque effect.

I adjusted the orientation with the ailerons and rudders.

I let the wings be erect a bit obliquely, and flew straight.

I heard sirens of police squad cars or ambulances.

In a moment.

The increase of acceleration.

“Stupid idiots!” I shouted as loudly as possible.

I could not see anything because of the tears welling up.

I took off the goggles and rubbed my eyes.

The walls of buildings were standing imposingly on both sides.

I was flying through the gap.

I want to destroy this city, I thought.

I want to blot out everything, I thought.

However, I could do nothing.

I was just flying, while making a thundering sound.

“Boomerang, what’s wrong? Stop the dangerous flight immediately.”

A dangerous flight?

What is a dangerous flight?

I have never heard of it.

Is there such a thing as a flight that is not dangerous?

What do I fly for?

Do they understand for what purpose aircrafts exist?

Do they know for what purpose humans live?

A bunch of fools who knew nothing were congregating.

For one thing, what the hell are they doing here?

They were just looking up at the sky.

They were watching a stranger, who was about to die, with their frowning eyes.

They wanted to keep it away from them, while peeping at it.

That's all.

Disgusting.

Filthy.

Dirty.

I am having an urge to spit on them.

“Boomerang, come back!”

The velocity was increasing more and more.

I was flying straight through the gaps between the buildings.

If I let go of this control stick only for a short while ...

If I close my eyes for a moment ...

My Sanka will probably collide with one of the buildings.

Many stupid people inside it will die.

That is what “suffering from accidents despite spectating from supposedly safe places” is about.

I laughed.

I wiped tears with my hand.

“Damn it!”

I shot the machine guns.

Sparks with sounds only.

Now, watch this.

This is an authentic show.

I had my Sanka roll over by 180 degrees.

The airframe swayed right and left, but I kept flying straight.

In the inverted orientation, I was beginning to be able to survey the situations of the roads.

The roads were heavily crowded.

Lines of automobiles stretched to elsewhere limitlessly.

They were probably honking horns.

I can't hear them.

I wonder if they are covering their ears because of the roaring sound.

I wonder if they are pinching their noses because of the exhaust gas.

An instantaneous wind would knock down signboards and blow dust.

Let them be scattered away.

Let them be blown down.

Everything.

This is the velocity of an aircraft.

Have you seen it before?

This is the power of an aircraft.

“Boomerang, do you read me?”

I made a quick roll again.

I went upright.

I saw something ahead of me.

What's that?

Is that a helicopter?

Come to think of it, where is the helicopter I saw earlier?

I guess that it is loaded with cameras of the mass media.

Shall I shoot down the helicopter?

It was getting closer to me.

An aircraft?

It was coming straight toward me from the front.

It shook its wings right and left.

What the ...

That is the Teacher's!

It was lunging at me.

We were at the same altitude.

A road was below us.

Buildings were on both sides.

The only escape route was above.

We were getting closer to each other quickly.

I closed the throttle by half.

I was reaching for the flap control.

We are having a head-on collision.

An aerial ramming?

But ...

Mysteriously ...

I am ...

Relaxed and collected.

Very calmly ...

I saw ...

His airframe.

If we end up colliding with each other ...

That would be okay.

If he is the one ...

Indeed ...

If he is the one.

At the brief moment the right wing of his aircraft was raised, I controlled the ailerons briskly, too.

I let the wings go vertical, going knife-edge.

I approached the wall of a building.

We passed by each other.

Whizzing by.

A whistle-like tune.

Then, silence.

Everything disappeared.

I heard the engine sounds.

Aural resonance.

I looked back.

Already ...

His aircraft ...

Gone ...

Faraway.

Inaudible.

Silence.

Quietly ...

Gracefully ...

He was about to ascend.

I too got the aircraft back to the upright attitude.

Climbing.

I was staring backward.

My tears had dried up.

He was getting farther and farther away.

He was going up.

It was becoming a speck.

Then ...

It disappeared.

I might not ...

See him again.

Never again.

I was having such a feeling, to some extent.

I heard the zipping through the wind.

Breath.

Vibration.

Sweat.

Sighs.

But, we are ...

Connected.

Only with none but air.

Only with the sky.

We are ...

Epilogue

I made a low pass above the airfield with the knife-edge maneuver and fired blanks flashily while flying in front of the tent. It might have looked like a demonstration to cheer them up.

After landing softly, I was taxiing on the taxiway. By then, my anger was completely cooled down to the level of duralumin. *I am certain that I was at my hottest, when I and the Teacher were passing by each other for the last time during the duel. Ah, he might have come back from the sky to cool me down.*

He is so gentle, stupid idiot.

Everything he does is none of his business.

Everyone wants to do what is none of anyone's businesses.

Oh, I cannot believe that.

Phew. Anyway. Here, things have settled properly.

I gave up, and decided to pretend to be a fool.

I have to stay alive until I fight against him next time.

I deliberately put on the brakes a little before the tent. On a mere whim, I just started to want to see the faces of those waiting at the place. *A small act of resistance.*

Sasakura came rushing out and jumped onto a step of the main wing. It was when the canopy was just being opened.

I first took off my helmet.

He put his hand on the edge of the canopy. Then, he extended the other hand to try to unlock my belt.

“Don’t touch it!” I warned.

“What?”

“I will do it by myself.”

“Hey, don’t be angry.” Sasakura frowned.

I glared at him.

“It could not be helped. I had no choice but to obey the command.” Sasakura sighed. “My bad.”

I unlocked the belt and used that very hand to slap his cheek. It hardly had any effect on him. I did not put my weight on the hand and was not in the proper posture to do so. It only grazed him. Sasakura kept his mouth shut. He was staring at me, while staying still.

“I am disappointed in you.” I dared to say so.

“Yeah ... But, if I confessed it before the flight, what would have happened?”

“I would not have flown in that case.” I answered. “Meaningless. Everything is meaningless.”

“Umm, you’re right.” Sasakura nodded. “I’m truly sorry. Anyway ...” He stopped the speech, and sighed again.

I got out of the cockpit. Sasakura jumped off the wing to give me some room.

I stood on the wing.

Several cameramen were approaching. The sounds of shutter clicks from their cameras followed.

Kai was walking toward me. Her walking posture was looking good.

The uniformed men were still waiting in a distance. They were always waiting. That was their stance.

Those on the ground are all rubbish.

Sasakura tried to lend a hand to help me. I ignored the offer, and jumped off the main wing.

Then, I walked toward the direction that was the opposite of the tent.

It was because I had a sudden urge to walk to that direction.

I myself did not know where I was heading for. I just did not want to get closer to wherever others were waiting for me.

“Kusanagi!” Kai called me out from behind.

I kept on walking without looking back.

She ran and caught up with me.

Kai was now walking beside me.

“Kusanagi.” She said in a subdued voice. “Come back.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Please.”

“Disgusting.” I stopped and spat out. Then, I shook my head. I inhaled the air, and exhaled the breath. I could not utter words any more offensive than that. Still, my feelings must have been trapped in my breath.

“I understand. I understand how you feel.”

“Really ...” I laughed a little. *What does she understand?*

“Are you thinking of giving up on piloting an aircraft?”

“Now, I don’t care.” I was glaring at Kai. “I have an option to follow the Teacher.”

“Listen to me carefully, please.” Kai tried to put her hand on my shoulder. I stepped away toward the back to avoid it. “Calm down. What can I do for you? What do you want to do? You are angry.”

“I am.”

“What can I do for your anger?”

“I have no idea.”

“Why don’t you hit me?”

“It would be meaningless if I hit you.”

“Are you going to keep the feeling within you?”

“Sorry?”

“Listen. If you are being mortified and frustrated, the only thing you can do is to reach for the higher level than others. By doing so, you will be able to look down on them. I believe you do understand that, because you have flown above the clouds.”

I looked at the tent. The men who were waiting for me.

Sasakura was still standing beside the Sanka. He was looking at me.

He could not possibly hear the conversation between Kai and me.

“Are you just going to take a fall like that? Or, are you going to climb up to the higher plane and show them what you have got?”

I was glaring at her.

Without words.

She was showing me a gentle smile as usual.

It was the face that appeared to be indicating that she was loving me.

That was the way of the appearance on her face, which was skillfully crafted.

I knew that, in the end, gentleness was no more than such a thing.

“You deceived me.” I said.

“I did not deceive you. But I admit I did not explain it to you. I have expected you to get angry, of course. However, I am not intending to apologize. I just ... I just ask you to do me a favor.”

“I want to punch you.” I said.

“Go ahead.” She smiled.

Silence.

I slightly raised my right hand, but it did not reach her. *How can I hit a smiling person?*

“I’m glad you have come back safely.” Kai confessed. “Each time Kusanagi flies, I can do nothing because I worry so much about you.”

“You’re lying.”

“I might be.” Kai nodded immediately. “If so, the words I have just spoken a moment ago were let out from my own mouth. Please understand the circumstance of me, who just spoke the words.”

I closed my eyes once.

Everything is ridiculous ... One version of Kusanagi uttered.

Another Kusanagi sighed.

Yet another Kusanagi was thinking about the following day.

About the sky of tomorrow ...

I was considering what I should demand.

I nodded.

“Oh?”

“I see.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded once again.

“So, will you come back to me?”

“I will.”

“Ah ...” Kai sighed. Tears welled up in her eyes for the first time. “I’m relieved.”

When I saw it, I might have felt relieved a bit, honestly.

Her tears were not for anyone else. I knew she was shedding tears for herself. Only those were real tears.

Kai and I were going back.

Sasakura was waiting for me. With his lips curved, he was showing an odd expression.

When I passed him by, he raised his hand.

I slapped it for him, with my full strength.

I felt the pain, too.

Some authorities were waiting in front of the tent.

Impressively beautiful uniforms were assembled.

Like mannequins in shop windows.

I knew they were all rotten bums.

Since I was beginning to feel disgusted, I looked up at the sky.

It was cloudy, suitable for this gloomy, rotten city.

Perfectly matching these rotten humans.

I will fly again.

Above the clouds.

To the bright, true sky.

I will be ascending once more.

While thinking only about that, I walked on the rotten ground.

This book was first published by Chuokoron-Shinsha in Japan in 2005 and translated in 2019 for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.

The Interview About Down to Heaven with Dr. MORI, Hiroshi B (Chief Editor of The BBB): Today, to commemorate the completion of the English version of “Down to Heaven”, the third novel from “The Sky Crawlers” series, we would like to have an interview with the author, Dr. MORI, Hiroshi. This is the third time for us to interview him at the end of a novel from the series. For the previous two interviews, we have received many positive feedbacks from readers both outside and in Japan. I actually hear that not a few fans of Dr. MORI’s works have bought the eBooks mainly to read these exclusive interviews. Dr. MORI, the other day you referred to this feature as “the annual interview”. We would like

to express our gratitude for your cooperation.

MORI, Hiroshi: It is I who want to thank you. Although I am not quite the one to do the publishing work for the English version in particular, the novels do actually get published. I am deeply grateful to you. About this interview, I feel this is the least of what I would like to do.

B: As of January 2019, the eBooks from “The Sky Crawlers” series have been downloaded in 25 different countries. They are downloaded more frequently in the countries whose official languages are not English. We at The BBB are pleasantly surprised because we could not have expected the situation before publishing the works. Dr. MORI’s works have been published since long before in the countries belonging to East Asia. The English versions enable the works to be found and read in more various countries that are not limited to Asia. What do you think about the situation like this? Also, do you have anything to anticipate about the situation in which your works have been translated into English? More specifically, not limited to novels, do you have anything among your previously published works, which you want to be translated into English?

MORI: In the English-speaking countries, people already have countless works written in English available for them. So, I think they tend not to try some works published in distant countries, unless they are uniquely interested in the eccentric cultures for some reason. Conversely, people in the countries whose cultures have not yet been expressed as literary works might adopt works from other countries more aggressively. In the case, the works need to be written in English, and then have storylines that are easy to understand and can be empathized by many people. There are many countries whose entertainment cultures have yet to be developed. Even if only a part of their elites can read the works as of now, the number will likely to increase slowly yet steadily in the future.

I have high expectations for my works to be translated into English, because the English language is being used widely and it provides the broader entrance to the introduction of the contents. I think it is important for the interfaces of works to be as universally available as possible. Simply put, I mean that it comes down to the compatibility of the works. I think that the particular function of such universal availability is a part of the value for the contents.

Among my works, I personally would like “The Void Shaper” series to be translated into English. Still, about the Japanesque works of this type, I suppose many great such works have already been introduced to the countries outside Japan. At the same time, almost all the people outside Japan have yet to know even the existence of the culture. Those with interest are already satisfied with the genre and others might not be interested in it at all from the beginning. I have such a pessimistic perspective about that. Since it is the series which I wrote for the readers outside Japan, I feel unfortunate that it has yet to be translated into English.

B: “The Void Shaper” series belongs to the genre featuring great swordsmen, which are popular both outside and in Japan. With Dr. MORI’s unique sensibility, lives of samurai swordsmen are described in the works. Surely, we too would like the readers outside Japan to discover and read the series. As you said, many similar contents may already exist. But, the works have the great value, because they have been created with the sensibility of Dr. MORI. We expect “The Void Shaper” series to be translated into English as well. We are reaffirming the important for us to widen the entrance to the readers outside Japan, with these English versions of “The Sky Crawlers” series, to realize the goal.

Now, let me ask you a customary question. In many of Dr. MORI’s works, excerpts from other authors’ books are used effectively. In this work “Down to Heaven”, the quotes from “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”, written by Leo Tolstoy, are very impressive. Do you have a special attachment to Tolstoy as a favorite author, or to this particular novel by him? If you do not have any attachment, what made you excerpt the sentences from the work?

MORI: Tolstoy is such a big name that everyone knows, and I think that it is the subject, for which many people may have thoughts like “I may try this.” or “What makes this so great as it is known to be?” All the excerpted books, other than novels, in my works are what I have read, of course. I have chosen them from the books I remember were interesting. On the other hand, I have not read 90 percent of other authors’ novels that I excerpt from. In most cases, I randomly buy a book, judging from the book title and who wrote it, and choose the parts to excerpt while flipping through the pages of the book. There have been only two novels which I excerpted from and started wanting to read. So, if I excerpt from a novel, I can say that I usually do not have any emotional attachment to it. The reason is simple. To

begin with, I am a person who does not read novels.

Still, I often excerpt texts from a book, because I make the assumptions for whatever the readers may imagine and incorporate it into my work. Generally speaking, famous pieces tend to have reasonably established images. Since I myself have not read the piece, I do not have a solid image about it. However, just its title gives me the images. I guess the image just from its title and reputation would be closer to the readers' average images than those I get after I actually read the piece.

At the time I choose a piece to excerpt from, I do not have any plan for the story I write or the story has not been solidified. It is not that I choose whatever may match the novel I am starting to write.

It is exactly the opposite. I think, by excerpting from a piece, I tend to bring the content of the novel in the works that I am working on closer to the image that is expressed by the excerpt. This is similar to the effect that you experience from listening to the background music. If you write a story while listening to music, you may be affected by the music to a certain extent, correct? That is what I want to emphasize.

If you write a story without an excerpt, it is similar to writing with no music. I can also say that it is the condition or the environment that is affected by silence.

In the case of “Down to Heaven”, I excerpted from the novel I myself have read. So, the excerpt and my novel have a relatively closer relationship than usual. However, I still think that the intimacy between the novel itself and the excerpt is not making so much of a difference in the quality of the story that I write.

B: We now understand that, for “Down to Heaven”, you have used the excerpts from the work by Tolstoy which you yourself have read. I guess not a few readers would be surprised by the fact that you usually reference the excerpts from novels that you have not actually read. Especially speaking, it might appeal to the readers outside Japan who hardly know Dr. MORI's unique thoughts and ideas. I hope this explanation of yours makes the readers outside Japan understand the uniqueness of the sensibility of the author Dr. MORI, Hiroshi, and they further become more interested in Dr. MORI and his works.

By the way, speaking of Tolstoy, he was a giant of Russian literature and one of the world-class novelists. One thing that surprised us after publishing the English

versions of Dr. MORI's works is that we periodically receive enthusiastic fan mails from readers in Russia. Among the 25 countries in which the works have been downloaded to date, the reaction from Russian readers might be the most pronounced, we thought. There seems to be a community of fans of Dr. MORI's works, and I was also told that they had even tried to read the original, Japanese version of "The Sky Crawlers" series. What do you think about the fact that your works are warmly welcomed by Russians?

MORI: Russia is our neighboring country. I'm sure it is a nation, very close to ours. In the past, I had some Russian acquaintances among researchers. But, I have never been to Russia, and never met anyone who has come from Russia to Japan. I do not know well about what type of culture they have. Also, I do not understand Russian language.

I think many of those who are elder than I am might not have good impressions about Russia. That is not the case for me. If someone has bad impression against a certain country, it does not mean anything. I mean, it is not that Russian people have become the Russian nationals by taking and passing the exams for the Russian certification.

The other day I received e-mails from several Russians about my garden railway. I was asked questions, such as about where railway tracks are being sold. I could do nothing but give the questioner information about Japanese manufacturers of railway tracks.

B: We at The BBB have published Dr. MORI's two free eBook titles relating to gyro monorails. "Theories and Experiments for Gyro Monorails" and "How to Build a Simple Gyro Monorail". These eBook titles have been downloaded in 31 countries to date. I'm sure that not a few people in the field of railway modeling pay attention to Dr. MORI's activities. Likewise, I expect "The Sky Crawlers" series to be downloaded in even more countries in the future.

Dr. MORI's works are being discovered not only in Russia but also in many countries. In my opinion, the phenomenon is not totally unrelated to the fact that Dr. MORI's works look straight into the solitude of human beings and gently confirm the loneliness. Dr. MORI has an essay book titled "The Value of Solitude" (not available in English). In that way, solitude is a common theme described in many of Dr. MORI's works. In my opinion, it is one of Dr. MORI's characteristics

as an author. Do you think “How to deal with solitude” is a universal subject of the humankind, common in all nations?

MORI: Honestly speaking, I’m not sure about that. You know, I just write my opinions that only go so deep as just stating, “I personally think so,” and nothing more. I have been able to observe the Japanese society for a period of time during which I have lived. Still, I think I spend time with the associates relatively less than other people do typically.

In many books, solitude is described negatively. There are descriptions in which some characters are pessimistic about being lonely and suffering in agony. But I just feel, “That sort of things happen, eh?” Since my childhood, I have wanted others to leave me alone, and I have felt that to keep in step with others was so burdensome.

Perhaps, this type of biased solitude has been generated, no thanks to the clubhouse mentality of the “village community” that is unique to Japan. If so, I prefer not to get involved in that, I thought. I don’t know how people in other countries deal with this issue, because I have hardly talked with or observed anyone about the matter.

I feel it might not be a widely discussed theme in non-Japanese literature that I have ever read. I mean, I have thought that to equate solitude with the sense of isolation might be peculiar to Japan, and that Japanese in particular might tend to feel strongly about it. Needless to say, loneliness of solitude is amplified by the social structure, which allows the sense of homey group unity, represented by the notion of “kizuna” (Japanese-style bonding of emotional ties), to propagate to circumstances.

In Western cultures, I guess people offend others in balder ways. I imagine, as the result, Westerners in general tend to be cornered into being abused, rather than being isolated into the sphere of loneliness. If such notions are included in the discussion to that extent, “How to deal with solitude” may finally become considered as a universal theme.

B: I see your point. Surely, the notion of solitude may differ from country to country, and the solitude of Japanese people might be a unique aspect of the Japanese society. The impressions for solitude that the potential readers have may depend on the countries they have grown up in.

“The Sky Crawlers” series has gathered attention from people in many countries. There is no arguing that one of the reasons is the movie version of “The Sky Crawlers”, directed by Mr. Mamoru Oshii, a world-class film director. In the interview at the end of the English version of “None But Air”, Dr. MORI said, “I remember Mr. Oshii was chosen as the director after I published the second novel (*None But Air).” Which means, by the time you started writing this third novel of the series, “Down to Heaven”, the plan to let Mr. Oshii direct the movie version had already been official. Is it correct? After you were informed that “The Sky Crawlers” would be made into a movie by the world-class director, did the announcement influence your writing “Down to Heaven” in any way?

MORI: The information of making the movie version did not affect my writing by that much. From the beginning, I had developed the imagination of fighter aircrafts engaging in the aerial combat against each other in the sky above the central area of a city. In this novel, I projected the imagination in the form of literature. By the time Mr. Oshii was chosen as the director, I might have already completed writing “Down to Heaven”.

Looking back, if the dogfight above the central area of a city was made into an animation or a live-action film with special effects, it could have become an exciting scene. If I remember right, such a movie was actually produced in Hollywood back then. In reality, it is impossible for a usual fighter aircraft to fly through a valley of buildings or turn at an intersection, although a light aircraft for acrobats may be able to do so. It is too dangerous in terms of the velocity, and such maneuvers are meaningless for fighter aircrafts. But, if it is made into a visual footage of motion picture, it could be an interesting piece. Come to think of it, fighter aircrafts in Star Wars execute such maneuvers, similar to the scene in this novel. It would be possible if the aircrafts have strong acceleration devices and computer-controlled systems. The human in the cockpit would not be able to withstand the strain, though.

Thanks to the movie version, “The Sky Crawlers” was made into a video game. I thought it would be interesting if they would incorporate the scene into the game. I mean, as a part of the game player experiencing the role of piloting an aircraft, it would be visually more interesting, if there are familiar objects in the background of the surrounding view, not just an empty sky.

B: When translating “The Sky Crawlers” into English, I often think I want to watch a live-action version of the film adaptation someday. The scene of a dogfight atop the central area of a city, which is described in “Down to Heaven”, will surely be photogenic when adapted into a live-action film. Because of the English version, the novel now can easily be read by the relevant players in movie industries outside Japan. So, I hope that the live-action film will be a thing of reality in the future.

As a distinctive characteristic of “The Sky Crawlers” series, the foreword of each novel is very impressive. In the case of “Down to Heaven”, the foreword starts with a shocking remark: “Listen, ugly adults.” The theme of “The Sky Crawlers” series is centered around adults, children, and Kildren, who are children living forever without becoming adults. When Dr. MORI wrote the remark “Listen, ugly adults.”, which type of readers were you having in your mind, adults or children? Or, did you intend to write a provocative remark that was targeted for both adults and children?

MORI: I write entirely for adults as the target readers. Children who are capable of reading this novel are likely to be halfway through in becoming adults. Therefore, this is a poem that I provocatively wrote for adults who have lost “childhood” within them.

In the first place, I created the world of “The Sky Crawlers” by coming up with the inversion of imagination based on the lyric in a song “Children Who Don’t Know War” (a hit song in Japan in 1970). I mean, back in the past days in Japan, only children were ignorant about war. However, in modern Japan, lasting peace has made everyone “adults who don’t know war”. I came to think that, for the adults instilled with peace, “children who are engaged in war” may turn out to be the most impactful setting.

Adults in a peaceful society often say, “We don’t want to send our children to battlefields.” It is about wishing that the peace would last into the future. However, the wish is escalated, to the level that they even reprove their children for saying things like “A fighter aircraft toy is cool.” Adults try to teach them that they are war devices and they are not cool.

It is not that children want to be involved in war. They just purely think that the design of a fighter aircraft is cool. When their admiration for the coolness is denied by adults, the children would feel the hypocrisy or deceit of adults. The problem is

why children are not allowed to say that they are cool. Adults, who just repeat “No war” vocally, do not quite understand this point. That is the reason for my writing the poem.

B: I’m surprised that “The Sky Crawlers” was born as the inversion of the phrase “children who don’t know war”. We learn a lot from Dr. MORI’s keen observation and method to create ideas. They surely possess the rings of conviction.

Speaking of the inversion, when I once asked Dr. MORI about the orientation of an aircraft (which side of the airframe is considered to be directed “upward” in a certain scene) in order to translate the novel more accurately, you taught me, by explaining, “In a dogfight, the relative orientations of the zenith and the ground may be flipped upside-down.” (The ground can be described as being “above” the pilot.) In conjunction with that, the sense of language that is embedded in the title “Down to Heaven” is impressive, because of the irony of falling (not ascending) to heaven, which is supposed to be the plane of sublime splendor. Dr. MORI has written a book titled “Falling Ropewalkers”. Have you been developing within yourself the aesthetics of taking a fall (or the aesthetics of extinction)? Is it similar to the sense of your stance for the affirmation of solitude?

MORI: It is not that I promote the affirmation. I am merely stating that it is important for us to notice the stereotype of “heaven being placed above us” is a preconceived idea. If it is above us for someone, then it is below us for others. This is the same as the matter of good and evil. It may differ, depending on the perspective of the standpoint. In fact, there cannot be such a thing as the absolute coordinate. In war, both sides fight in the name of respective justice.

I describe the sky as the place to materialize freedom in this series. By ascending to the sky, characters can be liberated. There may be no up or down for such a mind of freedom. Heaven and the mortal world may look the same.

Those who live on the ground cannot fall any further, so they can only imagine that heaven is the place to ascend to. However, those who live in the sky cannot ascend any higher than that, so heaven is placed below them in their minds inevitably. When an aircraft is flying upside-down (assuming the inverted orientation), heaven is placed above the pilot. Those on the ground just regard that perception as the aircraft going “down to heaven”.

B: Dr. MORI has described the freedom in the sky throughout this series. I think it is linked to the airiness and the liberation that I always sense from Dr. MORI's works. In Japanese, the word "power of imagination" can be written with the kanji characters whose meaning is "power to fantasize the sky". I feel "The Sky Crawlers" series is filled with the literal expression of "power to fantasize the sky".

Dr. MORI has written many popular novel series, including "The Sky Crawlers" series. As the volumes of finished works are piled up one by one, readers often come to learn of the surprising truths about events that have been described in earlier volumes. We can experience such things when reading "Down to Heaven" and "None but Air", of course. According to Dr. MORI, there was originally not a specific plan to publish the sequels for the novel, "The Sky Crawlers". So, when you were writing the first novel, the details of the following sequels that were not planned at that point were not existing. At the same time, did you let your instinct as a writer include in the first volume of the series the foreshadowing hints for the second and the third volumes to follow as sequels, even if you could have put the hints later into the sequels instead? To put it another way, do you always subjectively employ the technique of "intentionally writing suggestive hints and discovering the reasons for them when writing the sequels in later phases"?

MORI: Since I do not read many novels and have few novelist friends, I don't know how other authors deal with such technical matters. Whether I do it voluntarily or not, I am not so sure. Anyway, I have nothing at the beginning. While writing, everything is being produced. I cannot consume all of them in a single novel. Therefore, by using a part of them, I can write another story.

I have hardly been conscious of writing anything suggestively. But I think novels should generally be written suggestively. Everything in our real lives usually has the meaning. If that is the case, then novelists have to write suggestively to produce the realism in a fictional world.

While writing a story, countless possibilities are being produced. When I complete writing one novel, most of those possibilities become the ideas that I have not actually been able to use. If I use upon another new story a possibility that I came up with when writing a previous story in the past, other possibilities of the same idea will vanish. Once I use one idea, then many things are rendered useless. The ideas that I will not be able to use far outnumber those which I use. Still, there also

are ideas I newly come up with. In that sense, I do not run out of ideas or let the stock run low.

In short, it just comes down to whether I use the ideas or not. For example, if I use the idea, or reveal the truth, then the possibility will vanish. I personally do not like to do that, but fans enjoy the experience. I write novels for my job, so the higher priority should be placed on entertaining the readers.

B: Because you cannot consume all ideas in a single novel, you need to create a series of novels. Then, as the volumes are piled up, not only readers but also Dr. MORI yourself keep discovering new possibilities. One of the impressive aspects of this novel is the line “For the most optimal fight” that the character named Kayaba speaks, in Episode 3 of “Down to Heaven”. This impressive remark is described again in Episode 4. Also, in the video game titled “The Sky Crawlers: Innocent Aces”, “For the most optimal fight.” is used as a fixed phrase when a player makes a sortie. (*In the English version of the video game, the remark is translated into a simpler English phrase as “Happy hunting.”) Did you write the remark without any special intention? Or, did you come up with it because you were asked to create a fixed phrase for the video game version?

MORI: It has nothing to do with the video game. I had the intention of coming up with customary phrases used in this fictional world. I wrote “For the most optimal fight.”, not “For a good fight.”, because I thought it sounded relatively cooled down, more objective, and more effective.

In the context, words carry the possibility for gaining the power in the later phases of time. So, I believe that we need to contemplate it slowly and carefully, even if it might look trifle. Since novelists write about fictions, we need to attach importance to such details. Creating a world with words is, after all, equivalent to such details.

If I remember right, what I was asked to come up with for the video game were the names of fighter aircrafts that were not described in the novel version. They might have been described in the movie version. My memory is vague, and I do not quite remember anything about which one came first.

B: “The Sky Crawlers” has been known worldwide before being translated into English. In my opinion, it has a lot to do with not only the animation movie

directed by Mr. Mamoru Oshii but also the video game “The Sky Crawlers: Innocent Aces”, whose English and Japanese versions were released independently. I have the impression that the video game version faithfully recreates the interpretation of the world in the original novel. Dr. MORI, how were you involved with the development of the video game version, other than the names of the military aircrafts? What impressions do you have about the game version?

MORI: The game was created by the team (Team Aces), which had developed games for the “Ace Combat” series. So, they already had the basic subroutines of the program at that point. I once visited the office of BANDAI NAMCO Entertainment Inc., and had a meeting with the team staffs. After that, we often communicated with each other via e-mail about the game. I read the entire scenario. Particularly, I checked characters’ speeches. Many writers tend to make the speeches of female characters sound feminine, even though that does not appear in the English version. I fine-tuned the speeches by the female character not to be unnecessarily feminine. I have the impression that the development team got the job done with sincerity.

The video game is designed so that the player can detect the enemy with the radar. In the original novel, pilots look around with their naked eyes to locate the opponents. I think the latter gives you the more realistic feel to the experience. It can now be realized with the VR (virtual reality) headsets. Back then, using a control stick with a built-in acceleration sensor was as much as the player could do.

B: Both in “Down to Heaven” and the prequel “None But Air”, the respect by the main character for the Teacher is very impressive. In fact, this relationship overlaps with the feeling that I (the interviewer) have for you, Dr. MORI. In the past, have you yourself had such a mentor-like figure, who does not have to be limited to novelists and may include those in your research domain or the field of railway modeling, your hobby?

MORI: I have several in my research domain and the field of modeling. I feel fortunate to be able to recognize the genius of great talent, and it is important. I believe that, by reaching for those who are greater than they are, people can evolve and ascend to the higher level. However, what you should aim at is not necessarily limited to the very person himself or herself. The pitons of legacies that the geniuses left behind can be the targets. Literally, the pitons can be utilized as

handholds and footholds for advancing to the next level.

B: “The Sky Crawlers” series has already produced enthusiastic readers outside Japan. So, from now on, not only for Japanese readers, but also for readers outside Japan, the series should serve as handholds and footholds for following the back of Dr. MORI, Hiroshi.

The first novel “The Sky Crawlers” of the series “The Sky Crawlers” is chronologically the last story in the timeline of the series. It is extremely unique in a way that the ending of the story is shown to the readers at the beginning. In the interview at the end of the English version of “The Sky Crawlers” novel, Dr. MORI said, “Once I start writing, I can imagine, two or three works ahead into the series.” When you wrote “Down to Heaven”, were you able to imagine the details of the storyline, while thinking, “I need two more novel volumes, not three, to conclude this series.”?

MORI: No, I cannot be sure about whether I need two more novels or three, unless I actually write it. Usually, I only have images of vague space or distance. I myself can expand them and continue to write the story as I want, if it is just for myself. However, since I have to write it for the readers, the proper size is determined automatically. It is similar to producing a commercial movie by fitting it into the time span of two hours.

When I launch a new series, I can somewhat estimate the quality and quantity of the story to be created. In order to write many volumes, the quality that is supported by the richness and depth of the imagination is essential. At around the time I wrote the second novel of the series, I imagined this series would be concluded in about five volumes in total. I think that the balance of the whole picture becomes clearer, rather than the specific storyline or the details about the conclusion of the story. To put it in a simpler way, it is about judging, “I can continue to get the readers be interested in the series up to five volumes and no more, with just this much of quality.”

B: The other day, Dr. MORI gave us the permission to translate the fourth novel “Flutter Into Life” into English. We appreciate the opportunity that you are providing us. Now that the three English versions out of the five novels in “The Sky Crawlers” series have been published, would you like the readers to enjoy the whole series? Also, in order to comprehend this series, how do you position “Sky

Eclipse”, the compilation of short stories, available as the final title of the series? Do you believe that the world of the “The Sky Crawlers” series becomes complete, once the books of the series are read all the way to the short story compilation? Do you think the story collection is just a supplement and not as important as the other novels, each of which features a long story?

MORI: I do not necessarily want readers to read the whole series. Each book is published as an independent title. If one person reads only one of them, or if another one reads them in a random order, they are all within the range of what I, as the author, expect them to do. At the same time, I always think I do not want to write a book with which I cannot be satisfied. So, there is no book in particular that I designate as a breather.

Originally, I was not supposed to write the final book, the short story collection. But after browsing through the Internet and read the reactions from the readers, I thought I should give them a bit more of extra explanation. So, I wrote it, while scattering the hints like they are supplements.

But, whether they read it or not, they can obtain their own experiences. There is no notion of superiority or inferiority in such experiences, and there is no such thing as the correct answer or misunderstanding. The experiences are parallel to each other.

B: Thank you for the explanation in detail. We are almost done with today’s session. This time, you have given us more dense, profound, thought-provoking answers than you did for the interviews about “The Sky Crawlers” and “None But Air”. We really appreciate it from the bottom of the heart. I suppose those who have already finished reading this novel will be able to get the richer imagery if they read it again. I hope that, through the novel itself and this interview, the outstanding sensibility, characteristics, and appeals of Dr. MORI, Hiroshi, will be discovered in more and more countries around the world in the future. Dr. MORI, let me thank you again for your great cooperation and understanding.

MORI: Thank you very much, as usual. Also, I think many Japanese authors are worthy of being introduced to cultural regions outside Japan around the whole world. So, I hope that the activities such as this will last long and widely, to continue the development.

**This interview was conducted in January 2019, exclusively for The BBB:
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